

TOWARDS A CHILD UNION!

REDUCING INEQUALITIES IN THE EU
THROUGH INVESTMENT IN CHILDREN'S
EARLY YEARS



by

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www.szocialis.eu



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PREFACE

Our children – our future

By **László Andor**,

FEPS Secretary General

The COVID-19 crisis is not the first time that the European Union was exposed with a solidarity deficit. One main reason for this deficit to exist is that the development of the social dimension of the EU has always followed economic integration with a delay. Those opposed to the deepening of the social dimension keep referring to the subsidiarity principle, and the lack of explicit EU competencies in this field. If things stay as they are, every economic recession will aggravate the situation of children, while no recovery will bring a guarantee that they would fairly benefit from GDP growth. The idea of inclusive growth, once a centrepiece of EU strategy, seems to have been lost on the roadside.

By sidelining the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Juncker Commission simply broke the mirror that would have shown the real picture about social conditions in Europe. Luckily, the Eurostat did not stop producing essential statistics. The figures they provide would be worrying even without the COVID-19 effect. More than a quarter of children across the EU are experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing, poverty or social exclusion. The same vulnerable children are less likely, and in most cases, impeded, to access early childhood education and care and therefore acquiring key 21st-century skills. This should be a common concern, not only because of the disadvantages for children in their early life, but also because of the lasting effects. Children who grow up in poverty will most likely suffer from social exclusion when adults, perpetuating the intergenerational transmission of inequalities and undermining the basis of social cohesion and collective resilience.

But the EU must possess the capacity for policy innovation and development to deal with such very stubborn trends

of inequality. Experts, activists and European parliamentarians, who take this matter seriously, have arrived at the concept of a Child Union. This expresses the demand to the EU to grow up to the expectations of its citizens to not only work on a Banking Union, a Capital Market Union, an Energy Union and other economic cooperation, but also a Social Union.

The ‘Child Union’, as presented in this study, would be a critical component of a broader Social Union. It is the progressive response to overcome inequalities among children and prevent the transmission of poverty through the generations. This Child Union sets principles aiming at equal access to quality, inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and addressing structural inequalities through labour policies and social safety nets. This study, produced by FEPS through a multi-stakeholder project, helps answering whether a Child Union is feasible, how it would be implemented in practice.

One potential policy development to help tackle children inequalities across the EU is a dedicated Child Guarantee, an initiative proposed by the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament.¹ If adopted, the Child Guarantee would put in place a political commitment to provide every child at risk of poverty in the EU with access, among other services, to education and childcare.

The concept of the Child Guarantee took inspiration from the 2013 Youth Guarantee, that was meant to address the high level of youth unemployment and inactivity across the EU. Exactly at the time when the Youth Guarantee was invented, the European Commission also came forward

¹ <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/sds-achieve-breakthrough-european-child-guarantee>

with the – so far only – Social Investment Package, built around the recommendations against child poverty. The European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) was also launched. One key similarity between 2013 and 2020 has to be highlighted here: both were years when the seven-year EU budget was discussed, and the newly developed policy tools influenced the endgame of negotiations about the MFF (Multiannual Financial Framework).

Therefore 2020 is a critical year since it is now when the EU has to adopt a new long-term budget and within that the funds that provide vital support for social investment across the member states. This is also a time when, under the pressure of the COVID-19 emergency, EU leaders could not fail to come forward with a MFF much greater than before, for the sake of proper stabilisation effect, and in that social stabilisation will also have to play its part.

Once the Youth Guarantee was presented as a reaction to the financial crisis, a future Child Guarantee would reflect a more proactive and strategic approach: not only to improve the prospects of young people entering the labour market but also to improve the life-chances of future generations. Make no mistake, the root causes of children inequalities and the ultimate impacts on future social outcomes are complex. There is no silver bullet to solve this challenge, so it is unlikely that one policy initiative alone will change everything overnight.

This study helps the debate and the development of EU policies to tackle inequalities among children by identifying exemplary or promising national models, and also points to the key ingredients of an EU level strategy. Some questions surely remain outstanding. The main challenges

appear to be finding the most effective way the EU could support member states and determining whether the existing legal provisions, instruments and funding are sufficient to tackle children inequalities in all the diverse conditions of various EU member states.

Getting incentives right will be crucial, as past examples show. While the European Commission made a recommendation for member states in 2013 to draw on EU funding sources to support investment in children's development and well-being, in 2015 the European Parliament noted that member states had given little attention to using this funding in their fight against child poverty.² Moving towards a Child Union, by implementing its principles, in particular through the Child Guarantee and the enhanced financial instruments for post COVID19 recovery, should be able to ensure that good ideas and initiatives do not remain on paper, but make real progress in reality as well.

The way we help our children to develop and emancipate in Europe will greatly influence the future of our societies and our civilisation. FEPS is proud to have embarked on this journey, in an alliance with Pablo Iglesias Foundation, Reggio Children, Progresiva, and the Institute for Social Democracy for the joint research and discussions that have allowed to come forward with clear proposals and feed them into the policy process in the coming period.

² European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2015 on reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty (2014/2237(INI)) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52015IP0401>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE CHANGING GROUND OF INEQUALITY AND THE CHILD

- The tragedy of the pandemic COVID19 and the economic recession due to the lockdown, have shown how fragile our socio-economic systems are. A fragility largely due to the minimization of welfare state occurred in the past decades, which have exacerbated inequalities and undermined the collective resilience vis-a-vis crises.
- Progressives must fight for systemic transformations. Children are at the heart of this change because inequalities are already moulding in the early years of life, and therefore, policies, in particular early childhood education and care, which tackle unfairness among children (and their parents) lay the foundations for social justice and collective resilience.

THE CHILD UNION

- The 'Child Union' is the progressive response to overcome inequalities among children and throughout generations. It is an essential element of a New European Deal founded upon a revamped sense of solidarity and a welfare state enabling to tackle inequalities while also promoting collective resilience and sustainability.

THE INHERITANCE OF INEQUALITY

- Capabilities and skills which will accompany and determine life of an individual, start to form at birth and in the first years of life. So are inequalities. Poverty, marginalization, and exclusion negatively impact on children's stimuli, forging inequalities that will cumulate over time.
- Inequalities faced by one generation, affect opportunities and emancipation of young children, the next generation, who will most likely fall into marginalization and exclusion. It is like a vicious cycle, which prevents disadvantaged children to overcome the burden of inheritance, and with that, undermine collective resilience.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (AND OTHER LABOUR AND WELFARE POLICIES) AS EQUALIZER

- Evidence shows that participation in quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) programmes leads to positive gains for disadvantaged children, in the acquisition of capabilities and skills, the benefits of which might be seen through their later educational and life achievements.
- This research found that children from the bottom 40% socio-economic status who participated in ECEC under 3 years of age have higher chances to obtain scores in mathematics, reading measured through OECD PISA tests above the average in the EU more than 10 years later, when aged 15 years old. If participation happened at 1 year of age or below children have 16.5% more probability to close the learning gap in mathematics and 10.3% in reading, at age 2 years this difference is 14.9% for mathematics, 16.6% for reading. The chances decrease substantially when children enter ECEC after age 4 years, they become nil or even negative after 5 years of age.
- It is the reason why the European Commission adopted in 2013 the recommendation "Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage, highlighting the prominent role to early childhood policies for social cohesion and inclusive growth, and that has been recalled in the 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights (Principle 11).
- However, only half of EU members have reached the EU objective set, of 33% of coverage for ECEC below age 3. In 9 countries, participation to childcare is 20% or less. Moreover, access to ECEC tends to penalize children from disadvantaged families, lower income households or those living in rural and remote areas. In some countries less than 20% of these children participate to ECEC, compared to more than 70% among the top income households.
- Moreover, unequal enrolment in services for children is very often aggravated by access to lower quality settings, and the absence of positive interactions between extensive ECEC services and other labour and social protection policies, to reduce risk factors for children's development. According to the

following study, European children from the bottom 40% socio-economic status but living in countries where women unemployment rates are below the EU average have higher chances to reach the same level of competencies in mathematics (1.6%) and reading (8.8%), compared to the rest of European children. Equally countries where higher number of parents are eligible for parental leaves acknowledge higher chances for poorest children (4.1% more for mathematics and 6.4% more for reading) to overcome the educational disadvantaged, while for every 1% of reduction in the risk of poverty after social transfers (today hitting 23 million children across Europe, 24.3%), chances increase by 0.7% in mathematics and 1.3% in reading.

THE CHILD UNION IN ACTION

It is therefore imperative for Progressives to promote the Child Union and its 3 principles:

1. Ensure access to high quality ECEC for all children, in including disadvantaged children, through ensuring children rights and legal entitlements; universal public provision accompanied by additional resources and criteria for children in disadvantaged conditions.
2. Make ECEC positively interacting with expanded social protection and labour policies to tackle structural inequalities as risk factors for children's development, namely: universal basic income for children or income transfers schemes benefiting children, active labour market policies to stimulate employment, particularly women employment, statutory minimum wage, adequate parental leaves (for both mothers and fathers) and housing.
3. Guarantee equal access to quality /inclusive ECEC services, through inclusive learning outcomes, curricula and learning environments that promote the 21st century skills, including the capability embrace diversity, cooperation and solidarity, and environmental justice; along with pedagogical projects aiming at strengthening children's emancipation and their role as agents of democratic and progressive changes; the professionalization of the staff, rights and adequate salaries, and the recognition of their role as

co-agents of change; democratic involvement and participation in learning of parents and communities.

- Many Progressive leaders are promoting the Child Union in Slovenia, in cities like Barcelona, Ghent, Reggio Emilia, or in small rural towns such as Anthisnes in Belgium.

CHILD UNION IN THE EU

- Progressives must demand that the Child Union principles are embedded into the European Semester by accounting them into a renewed - and equitable and sustainable - EU Social Scoreboard, and that they are prioritized in the work of the EU Social Protection Committee and Employment Committee, as well as in parallel Committees in the European Parliament and the Committee of Regions
- European funding instruments, such as the European Structural and Investment Funds and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and in particular the Child Guarantee, that must be rapidly put in place and implemented, must be used to promote the Child Union
- More importantly, the Child Union must be considered as an integral part of the recovery packages post-COVID19 and therefore to allow Member States to implement its principles to tackle children's learning disadvantage, increase opportunities for parents to return to work and restoring disposable income, and build collective resilience vis-à-vis present and future crises.

I. INTRODUCTION

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Children are at the heart of this change. While the abilities and skills necessary for individuals to grow up, live and be emancipated in the globalised world are developed right from the early years of life, so are inequalities. Policies to tackle inequalities in childhood are therefore an essential element in building the new progressive welfare – and societal – paradigm.

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Europe is experiencing one of the worst health crises since the second world war. The covid-19 pandemic has so far infected more than 1,400,000 people and killed over 165,000.³ The lockdown, and the stop to economic activities decided upon by many governments of the EU, in contrast with the expansion of the pandemic, is causing a devastating recession, and is particularly hitting households which are economically and socially disadvantaged.

The crisis has highlighted the fragility and unsustainable nature of our current global economic and social model.

Indeed, within the EU, our current model has exacerbated inequalities between those who are benefitting from globalised markets and innovations, and other groups or communities who are losing opportunities and safety nets. The divide, largely due to deregulated markets and the minimisation of the welfare state, has undermined collective resilience not only to economic crises, but also to environmental and, as we have seen, health, crises.

Complexity is the new reality that progressives must embrace in order to create a sustainable development paradigm in which, together with democratic institutions, economic, social and environmental policies are part of the same, real, New Deal for Europe – a New Deal which will make the changes work for all.

At the heart of the new paradigm there should be a revamped welfare state system that enables the inequalities in today's complex, mutating and fragile economies and societies to be tackled. This revamped welfare state system should protect the most disadvantaged, and at the same time equip them. A renewed sense of solidarity is needed as the basis for reconstructing collective resilience if recurrent downturns are to be confronted adequately.

Children are at the heart of this change. While the abilities and skills necessary for individuals to grow up, live and be emancipated in the globalised world are developed right from the early years of life, so are inequalities. Policies to tackle inequalities in childhood are therefore an essential element in building the new progressive welfare – and societal – paradigm.

³ European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Updated 05.06.20

Over the last two decades, there has been increasing interest in the role that early childhood education and care (ECEC) can play in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. A growing body of evidence shows that participation in quality ECEC programmes leads to positive gains, particularly for the most disadvantaged children, in the acquisition of abilities and skills whose benefits can be seen beyond childhood into later educational and life achievements.

However, the picture of ECEC in Europe today is rather gloomy from an equality standpoint.

A number of factors related to access to quality ECEC services currently hinder the equalising potential of ECEC, and may even contribute to widening the gap. Access to services in most EU countries tends to penalise children from disadvantaged families, lower income households or those living in rural and remote areas. Moreover, the unequal enrolment of children in ECEC services is very often aggravated by disadvantaged households having access to lower quality settings. Quality refers to inclusion, or the capacity of ECEC programmes to emancipate every child and build collective resilience. In addition,

in most European countries early learning programmes are not conceived as part of a broader welfare approach that aims at fighting the inequalities in changed and fragile economies and societies. Early learning programmes therefore interact poorly with other labour and social protection policies. This increases the risk factors for children's development, and alongside this, it increases the exclusion and marginalisation of groups and territories.

A Child Union is the progressive response to overcoming inequalities among children – and throughout the generations. It is an essential element of a New European Deal that makes the economy and society work for all. Furthermore, it should emancipate the most disadvantaged children and families by increasing their life chances and their ability to be the agents of collective resilience. A Child Union is a set of principles aiming at equal access to quality and inclusive ECEC, and at addressing structural inequalities through labour policies and social safety nets. Today a Child Union is needed more than ever, when Europe is not only having to confront a terrible health crisis but also an economic recession that might crumble the foundations of communities' social cohesion and of the European project itself.

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II. INEQUALITY AND ECEC



ILLUSTRATION 1

Toddlers 3 Classroom (children aged 24-36 months), Nilde Iotti municipal Infant-toddler Centre

*Pictures from the archives of the Documentation and Educational Research Centre, Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia
© Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia.
Courtesy of Reggio Children*

2.1. THE CHANGING GROUND OF INEQUALITY

Equality is the hallmark of progressivism. Historically, progressive forces find their essence in the objective of radically reorienting economies and societies that are characterised by inequality, towards fairness and justice. While equality has been the goal, the welfare state has been the means.

The current globalised economic system is characterised by highly competitive markets, technological innovations and knowledge-based economies. Exogenous factors, together with the political decisions to deregulate markets (which thus increases unshared profits at global level) and to disempower welfare systems (which have now been shrunk by decades of budgetary cuts) have greatly contributed to increasing all forms of inequality.⁴

A divide has been created between those who can benefit from globalisation, and those who cannot. Those who can benefit from it are better prepared to face changes and crises because they have skills and safety nets, and live in the 'centre' of the new economic landscape. However, there are large parts of the population, in particular the working and middle classes, who cannot benefit from globalisation, who very often live in suburban or remote and rural areas, who lack both skills and protection, and who therefore increasingly face impoverishment,

marginalisation, and limited defences during downturns.⁵ These groups and communities feel powerless in the face of the changes that have occurred over recent decades and resulted in the emergence of the globalised world, and they are now struggling to survive the economic recession provoked by the covid-19 pandemic. With the hardship of the recession, this sense of being the 'forgotten' risks, and will continue to risk, increasing these groups' resentment of the mainstream political forces. It will also risk fuelling anti-EU and far-right populist forces, unless progressives show quick adaptability and readiness to prevent further social crises.

It is therefore imperative for progressives and social democrats to propose systemic transformations of our economic and social model – a New Deal making Europe work not only for the few, but for all. Promoting equality also strengthens collective resilience. This imperative has become even more urgent now that the covid-19 pandemic and ecological emergencies show how fragile and unprepared the current model is in the face of crises that put people and the planet at risk.

These transformations can only come about by recentring the goal of political action towards solidarity and equality, through redistributing opportunities and benefits initially among marginalised groups and territories. A new welfare state paradigm is needed as the engine

⁴ Stiglitz, J. (2019), *People, Power, and Profits. Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent*, London: Penguin.

⁵ Hochschild, A. (2017), *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, New York: The New Press.

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Promoting equality also strengthens collective resilience. This imperative has become even more urgent now that the covid-19 pandemic and ecological emergencies show how fragile and unprepared the current model is in the face of crises that put people and the planet at risk.

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of this redistribution. The new paradigm should firstly strengthen the original mandate of the welfare state, to protect and assist citizens facing economic, environmental or, as seen now, health downturns; secondly, it should equip individuals and communities through the provision of skills and abilities which enable them to seize opportunities from globalisation.⁶ However, equipping also means emancipating the ‘forgotten’, transforming them from passive and powerless spectators of the status quo into active agents of a collective change towards more just and resilient economies and societies.

but also so-called ‘non-cognitive’ abilities, or socio-emotional skills (for example, critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration, curiosity, initiative, persistence, and social and cultural awareness) – enabling individuals to solve unstructured problems, to be creative and adaptive, and to undertake non-routine tasks that are driven by new and constantly changing contexts, information and communication.⁸

2.2. THE INHERITANCE OF INEQUALITY

The cognitive and socio-emotional abilities and skills, which are essential for individuals to grow up and live as active citizens today and in the future, start to form in the early years.

From an economic perspective, an estimated 65% of children entering primary school today will be employed, when adults, in jobs that do not yet exist.⁷ As a result, the rapidity of labour market mutations will increasingly require individuals to deploy traditional cognitive skills (i.e. reading, science and mathematics among others),

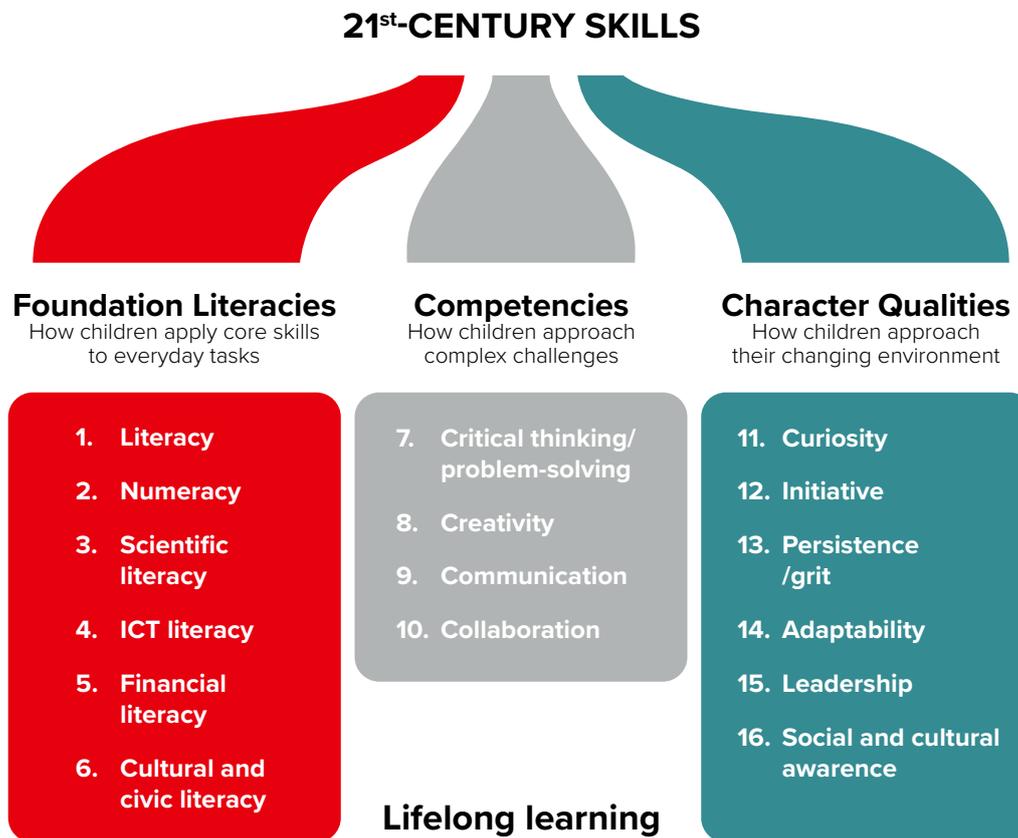
6 Hemerijck, A. (Ed.) (2017), *The Uses of Social Investment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

7 Davidson, C. (2013), *Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science Will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century*, New York: Penguin Books.

8 Levy, F. and Murnane, R. (2013), *Dancing with Robots: Human Skills for Computerized Work*, Third Way (<http://content.thirdway.org/publications/714/Dancing-With-Robots.pdf>)

II. INEQUALITY AND ECEC

Figure 1- Students require 16 skills for the 21st century



(Source: World Economic Forum, 2015)

The World Economic Forum defines these abilities as ‘21st-century skills’ for individuals to cope with everyday tasks, as well as to approach complex challenges and changing environments.⁹ According to both economists and neurologists, these skills are moulded in the early years of life, before entering primary education. Early childhood is considered to be a sensitive period when the development of brain connections, which are the basis of the learning of key cognitive and socio-emotional skills, is at its peak.¹⁰ These abilities are not only relevant for economic purposes, notably for entering the labour market, but are part of, and the starting point of, the emancipatory process of children and the construction of collective resilience.

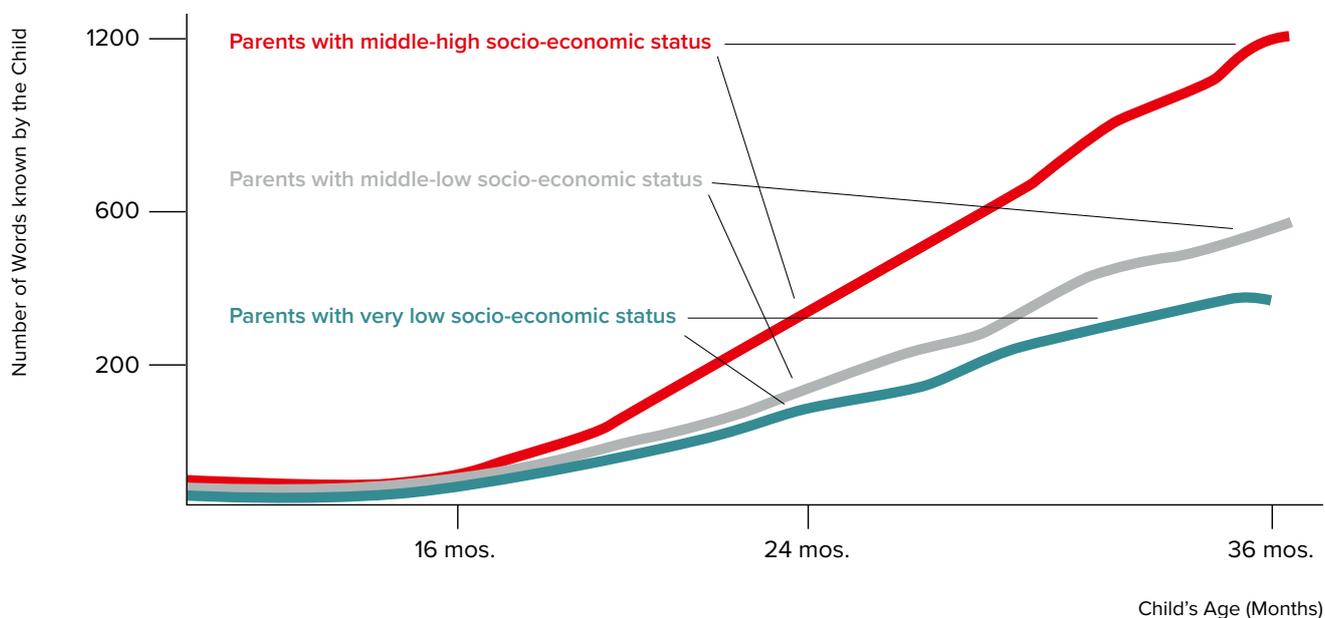
However, this is also the time when inequalities appear, as well as the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. The distribution of abilities and skills at birth and in the first years of life is not equal, and differences are largely influenced by inheritance. Early development is certainly determined by nature but also and more importantly by nurture, or the quality of interactions that a child has with the surrounding environment. Poverty, marginalisation, and exclusion negatively impact on children’s stimuli, forging inequalities that will cumulate over time.¹¹

9 World Economic Forum (2015), New Vision for Education Unlocking the Potential of Technology (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEFUSA_NewVisionforEducation_Report2015.pdf)

10 Heckman, J. (2008), ‘The case for investing in disadvantaged young children’ (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227349437_The_Case_for_Investing_in_Disadvantaged_Young_Children); Heckman, J. (2013), *Giving Kids a Fair Chance*, Boston: MIT Press.

11 Cunha, F. and Heckman, J. (2006), ‘Investing in Our Young People’, Paper for National Institutes of Health (<http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/061115.education.pdf>)

Figure 2- Disparities in Early Vocabulary Growth



(Source: Hart and Risley, 1995)¹²

Childhood is the starting point of inequalities, and the foundation of marginalisation and exclusion.

The structural income inequalities faced by one generation affect the opportunities and emancipation of young children in the next generation. The same children, when grown up into adults, will most likely fall into social and economic marginalisation and exclusion, becoming the ‘forgotten’ of tomorrow, and perpetrating the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. It is like a vicious cycle, which prevents disadvantaged children from overcoming the burden of inheritance. And by doing so, it harms not only the individuals’ chances in life, but the collective resilience to changes and downturns, thus preventing the construction of more inclusive, sustainable and efficient, societies and economies.

The role of ECEC in tackling inequalities

The cycle of inequalities is neither inevitable nor irreversible. There is consensus among scholars that whilst the primary caregivers (families) set the foundations of children’s development, quality Early Childhood Education and Care programmes can be effective interventions in tackling inequalities at the start, and can be effective in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. This argument is based on several longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, carried out in particular in the United States and in Europe. They assess the long-term effects of participation in early learning programmes, particularly on children living in more marginalised groups or territories.

Children who have been enrolled in high quality ECEC show higher cognitive, and more importantly, socio-emotional skills. Quality, in this respect, refers to programmes occurring in centres with trained staff, established pedagogical approaches and guidelines promoting the integral development of the child (including a positive relationship with parents) in well-set learning environments.¹³

¹² Hart, B. and Risley, T. (1995), *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, Baltimore: Brookes.

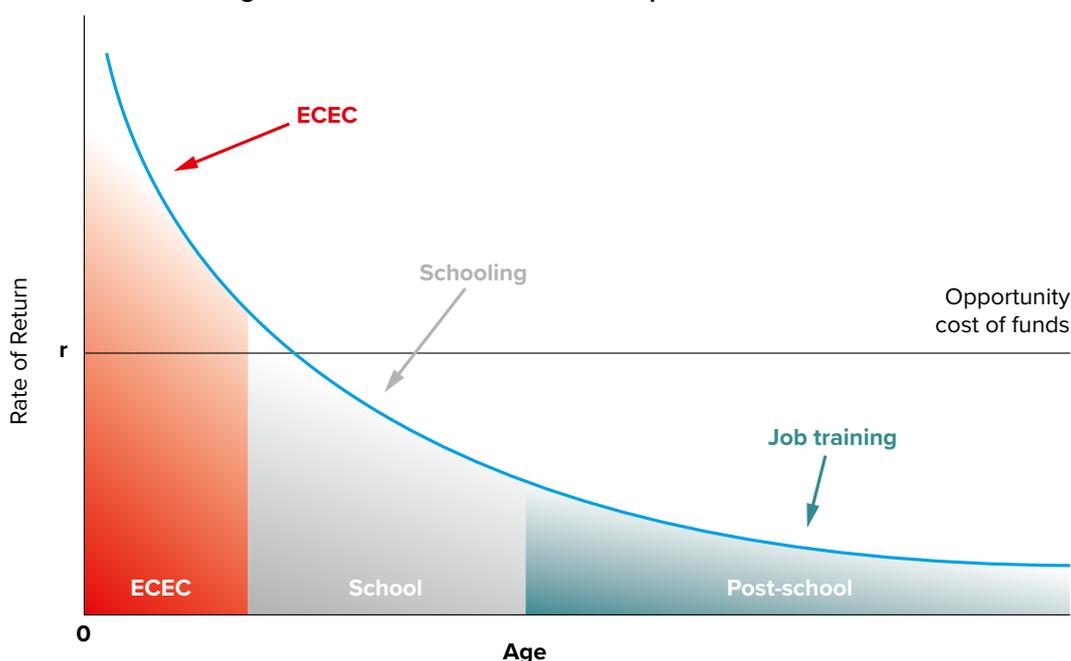
¹³ Chaudry, A., Morrissey, T., Weiland, C. and Yoshikawa, H. (2017), *Cradle to kindergarten: A new plan to combat inequality*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

II. INEQUALITY AND ECEC

These positive effects last throughout adolescence and into adulthood, reducing the school dropout rate, increasing the probability of reaching higher education and better employment positions. Yet, the important aspect, from an inequality perspective, is that the effects are particularly significant for children living in disadvantaged socio-economic households.¹⁴

In addition, studies in the area of economics, in particular those conducted by Nobel Prize winner James Heckman, have also outlined that returns on investment in ECEC are particularly high in comparison, for instance, with policies tackling inequalities in later years, such as reduction in dropout rates and adult education.¹⁵

Figure 3- Rates of return to human capital investment



(Source: Heckman and Masterov, 2007)

By equipping marginalised children, ECEC represents a relevant – and economically efficient – equalising policy, and a pillar of the new welfare paradigm towards inclusive and sustainable economies and societies.¹⁶ ECEC enriches the historical role of education, within the European social model, of emancipating the ‘forgotten’ and enhancing collective solidarity and resilience. However, in order to take on this function, ECEC must be designed and conceived as part of a bigger – welfare – picture. This bigger

picture should complement the equipping of children. Policies to strengthen skills and abilities should therefore be accompanied by other policies protecting and assisting marginalised groups and territories, in particular social protection.¹⁷ This is also underlined by research which has revealed that ECEC might have beneficial effects on the most marginalised, but does not reverse the intergenerational inequality trap much if excessive income gaps among households persist.¹⁸

14 Heckman, J. (2008), op. cit.; Heckman, J. and Masterov, D. (2007), ‘The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children’, *Review of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 29, issue 3; OECD (2011), ‘Pisa in Focus: Does Participation in Pre-Primary Education Translate into Better Learning Outcomes at School?’, Paper (https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/does-participation-in-pre-primary-education-translate-into-better-learning-outcomes-at-school_5k9h362tpvxp-en)

15 Heckman, J. and Masterov, D. (2007), op. cit.

16 Esping-Andersen, G., Gallie, D., Hemerijck, A. and Myles, J. (2002), *Why We Need a New Welfare State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

17 http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2018/g20_initiative_for_early_childhood_development.pdf

18 Morabito, C., Vandebroek, M. and Roose, R. (2013), ‘The greatest of equalisers: A critical review of international organisations’ views on early childhood care and education’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(3), 451-467; Morabito, C., Van de gaer, D., Figueroa, J. and Vandebroek, M. (2018) ‘Effects of high versus low-quality preschool education: A longitudinal study in Mauritius’, *Economics of Education Review* 65, 126-137.

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By equipping marginalised children, ECEC represents a relevant – and economically efficient – equalising policy, and a pillar of the new welfare paradigm towards inclusive and sustainable economies and societies. ECEC enriches the historical role of education, within the European.

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2.3. ECEC IN THE EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL AGENDA

European Commission Recommendation on Investing in Children

In 2013, the European Commission adopted the recommendation “Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage”, which outlines the ideal policy mix for national strategies to reduce child poverty and promote children’s well-being. It gives a prominent role to early childhood policies in equalising life chances and promoting inclusive growth. The recommendation invites member states to prioritise interventions aiming, notably, to reduce barriers to enhancing the rights and abilities of all children to grow up and live an active life. This comes through access to affordable quality services, in particular ECEC, and through ensuring adequate material resources for tackling structural inherited inequalities, while also favouring children’s participation in decision-making.¹⁹ The recommendation follows and updates the European Council decision in 2002 to set targets for EU member states for the first time (the so-called Barcelona targets) to provide preschool education to at least 90% of children, and childcare to at least 33% of children under three years old.

International agenda

The approach adopted by the European Commission is fundamentally in line with the international agenda on children’s rights and sustainable development. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified in 1990, recognises early care and education as a fundamental right of children (Art. 28 and 29) and encourages countries to undertake adequate measures to ensure access to services (Art. 18, para. 3) for every child (Art. 2).²⁰ In its General Comment on implementing child rights in early childhood, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child urges states parties to develop rights-based, coordinated, multisectoral strategies in order to ensure children’s best interests. It also calls for a comprehensive framework for early childhood services, provisions and facilities, backed up by information and monitoring systems, and with the involvement of parents.²¹

In addition, ECEC is also identified as a key policy for achieving the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda, adopted in 2015, includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to be reached by 2030. One of the goals is specifically devoted to ECEC (SDG 4.2), and states that every child must attend at least one year of pre-primary education in order to be developmentally (cognitively, physically and socio-emotionally) on track.²²

19 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1060&langId=en>

20 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

21 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), (2005), *General comment No. 7 (2005): Implementing child rights in early childhood*, 1 November, CRC/C/GC/7 (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/5497ddcb4.html>).

22 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>

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Recent initiatives to promote ECEC in the EU

The European Union's commitment to ECEC was taken further in 2017 with the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which affirms that children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality, protection from poverty, and specific measures to enhance equal opportunities (Principle 11).²³ More concretely, two actions have been taken to support member states in guaranteeing the right to ECEC. Firstly, the European Parliament proposed in 2015 to establish a Child Guarantee, with the aim of expanding access to services, including ECEC, for the most disadvantaged children across Europe. Secondly, the 'framework of quality indicators' developed by European Commission was adopted in the form of a Council Recommendation in 2018. This is the EU's Quality Framework on ECEC, with recommendations ranging from structural quality (staff: children ratio, qualifications, learning environment, physical infrastructure, and curriculum) to process quality (interactions between ECEC staff and children's families, relations between staff and children and among children themselves) to governance, financing and equity in access to services.²⁴

2.4. EVIDENCE OF THE EFFECTS OF ECEC (AND OTHER WELFARE POLICIES) ON CHILDREN'S EQUALITY IN EUROPE

A number of studies have explored the positive effects of participation in quality ECEC on life outcomes, and in particular learning achievements and the acquisition of key competences and skills for growing up and living in the 21st century.²⁵ For example, analyses conducted by the OECD have shown that even one-year of enrolment in childcare might result in higher scores in the Programme for International Students Assessment

(PISA).²⁶ PISA assesses key cognitive competencies of children at age 15, focusing on mathematics and reading literacy.²⁷ However, few studies have attempted to understand the effects of participation in quality ECEC on children's inequalities in learning, while also adding external factors, notably welfare and labour policies. This is mainly because data are usually scattered across diverse databases and surveys. This paper therefore attempts to explore these dynamics, by matching OECD PISA individual data with macro-national and regional data from external sources, notably Eurostat.

Findings show that only 13% of the European children living in households in the bottom 40% income or socio-economic and cultural status (ESCS) percentile²⁸ reach or surpass the EU average score in OECD PISA tests in mathematics and reading.²⁹

Participation in ECEC programmes might contribute to increasing the educational chances of less fortunate children. Looking at Fig. 4, children who participated in ECEC under 3 years of age have higher chances of obtaining scores in mathematics, reading above the EU average more than 10 years later, when aged 15 years old. Particularly important is the age of entry into ECEC, with those children participating at 1 year of age or below having 16.5% more probability of closing the learning gap in mathematics and 10.3% in reading, while the percentage for children enrolled at age 2 is 14.9% for mathematics and 16.6% for reading. However, the chances decrease substantially when children enter ECEC later, and after age 4 the chances become nil or even negative after 5 years old.³⁰

23 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

24 https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf

25 Vandenbroeck, M., Lenaerts, K. and Beblavy, M. (2018), 'Benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care and the conditions for obtaining them', Report No. 32, European Expert Network on Economics of Education, Brussels.

26 OECD (2011), op. cit.

27 <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

28 The OECD PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) is derived from several variables related to students' family background: parents' education, parents' occupations, a number of home possessions that can be taken as proxies for material wealth, and the number of books and other educational resources available in the home. OECD (2015), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education*, Paris: OECD.

29 The share grows over 25% for children in the higher 40% ESCS. The analysis included EU member states plus the UK, Norway, and Iceland. OECD (2018), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I) What Students Know and Can Do*, Paris: OECD.

30 All the results have been obtained by means of a logistic regression model for the probability that a child in the bottom 40% of the ESCS has a score in math (or reading) greater than the EU average. This is in line with the 'shared prosperity' target of UN Sustainable Development Goal 10. The approach used for calculating the standard errors of the estimated average marginal effects is known as balanced repeated replication (BRR); in particular the variant known as Fay's method was used. Only estimates which have resulted in being statistically significant have been reported.

Figure 4- Marginal effect of age of attendance on the probability that European children in bottom 40% ESCS have a score in Mathematics above EU average (%)

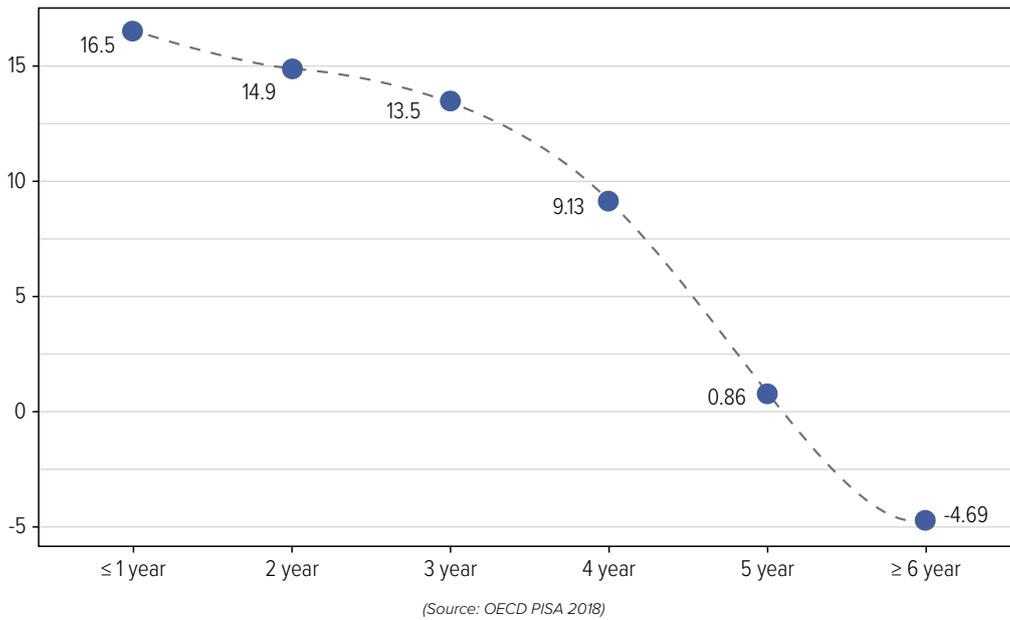
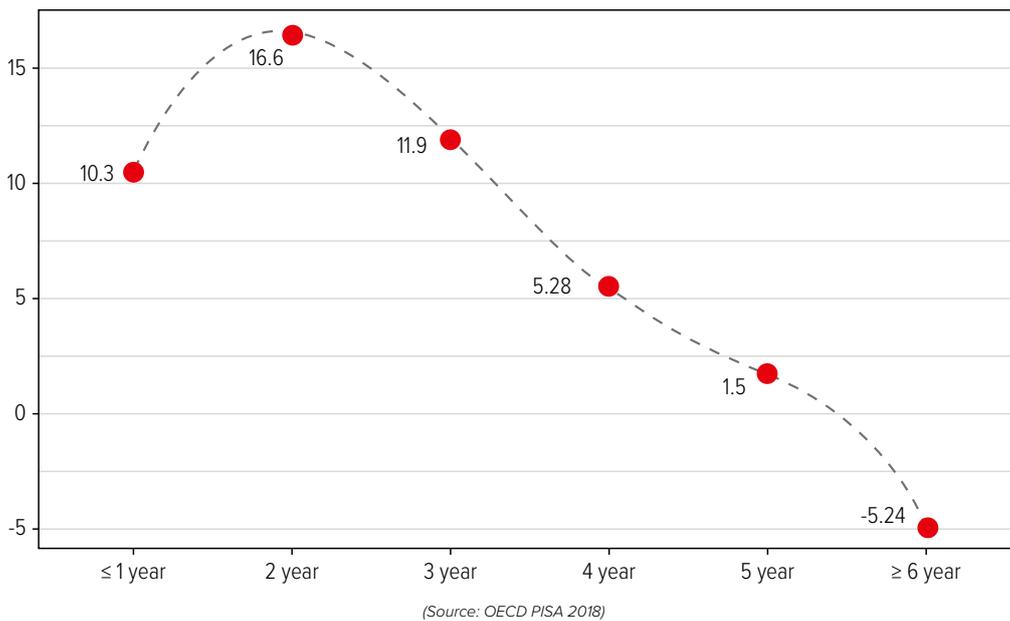


Figure 5- Marginal effect of age of attendance on the probability that European children in bottom 40% ESCS have a score in Reading above EU average (%)



II. INEQUALITY AND ECEC

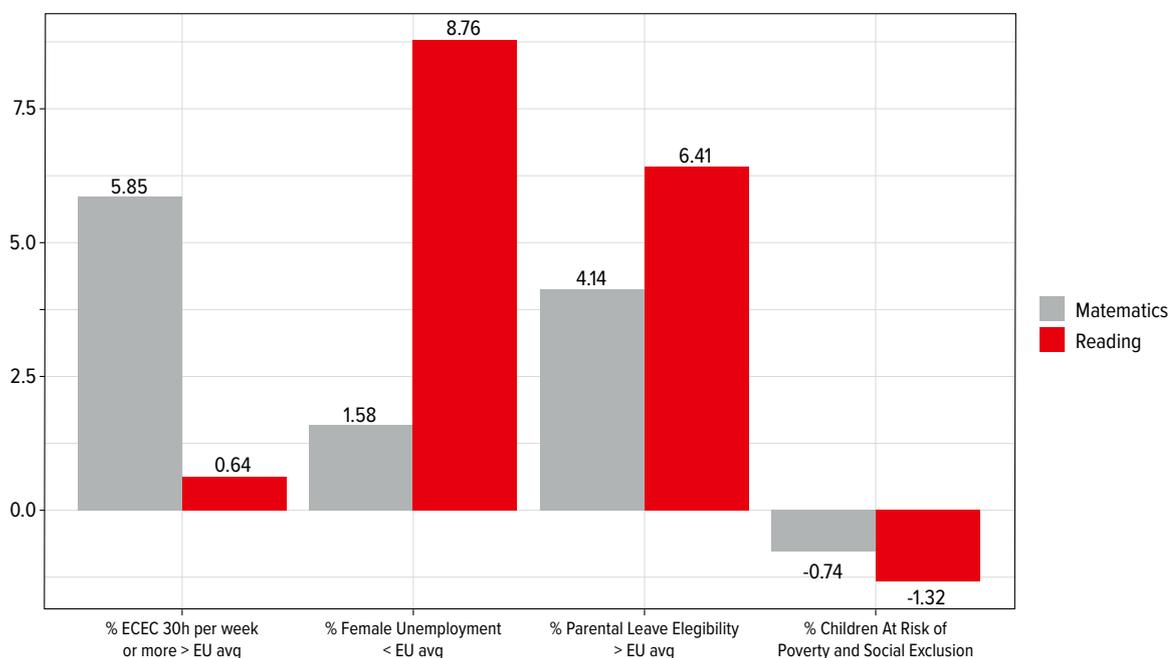
In addition, the number of hours of ECEC services also influences educational chances, with children in countries where services, on average, offer more than 30 hours of ECEC, having a higher probability of performing above the average in both mathematics (5.9%) and reading (0.6%)³¹ (See Fig. 6).

While it is a prominent equaliser,³² ECEC must nevertheless be accompanied by other policies addressing structural inequalities. As Fig. 6 outlines, European children from the bottom 40% ESCS who live in countries where the share of women employed is above the EU average have greater chances of reaching the same level of competences in mathematics and reading, compared to the rest of European children³³ (1.6% for mathematics and 8.8% for reading). In addition, in countries where a higher number of parents are eligible for parental leave there is also a higher probability

of socio-economically disadvantaged children (4.1% more for mathematics and 6.4% more for reading) performing above the European children's average educational level.

Equally, a lower incidence of the risk of poverty among children contributes to enhancing the educational opportunities of more disadvantaged children: for every 1% of reduction in child poverty (after social transfers), children from the bottom 40% ESCS percentile increase their chances of reaching and surpassing the average level of competences of EU students by 0.7% in mathematics and 1.3% in reading.³⁴ It has to be underlined that a large proportion of children at risk of poverty in Europe come from working poor parents. The risk of poverty rate is therefore determined by the level of market inequalities, as well as by the effectiveness of the social protection system in reducing these inequalities.

Figure 6 - Marginal effect of age per N of hours of ECEC, female unemployment, parental leaves and risk of poverty on the probability that European children in bottom 40% ESCS have a score in Mathematics and Reading > EU average



(Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC 2018, PISA 2018, Labour Force Survey, 2008 and World Bank Indicators 2018)

31 Eurostat, EU-SILC (2008). A variable has been constructed to compute countries in which children participate in ECEC from 0-3 years of age, above 30 hours per week, and below. We used data from the same year when children taking the PISA test in 2018 enrolled in ECEC.

32 Data do not reflect the quality of ECEC. This aspect will be explored further in the next chapter.

33 Two variables have been constructed, the first to compute countries in which rates of female unemployment are lower than the EU average (Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, 2008), the second to compute countries where ineligibility rates are lower than the EU average (World Bank Indicators, 2018). For the latter, data series are not available.

34 Eurostat, EU-SILC (2018). The risk of poverty measured as the proportion of children (below 18 years old) living in households where disposable income is below 60% of the national median after social transfers.

THE CASE OF WOMEN AND MIGRANTS

The analysis revealed that girls from more disadvantaged households have fewer chances (-4.7%) of reaching the average level of competences of European children in mathematics, but more chances for reading (8.4%). This finding highlights how gender discrimination is entrenched in our societies, which consider girls as somewhat 'naturally' inclined towards the humanities, and less towards the sciences. Similarly, European children of first and second-generation migrants, from the bottom 40% ESCS percentile, have fewer chances of closing the educational gap with the rest of children (7.2% less probability for first generation migrants and 3.8% less for second generation migrants in mathematics, 8.2% less for first generation in reading while no differences are observed for second generation). The fact that these conditions remain significantly associated with inequalities in learning performance, even when these children participate in ECEC or come from environments that better address structural inequalities, raises issues in particular about the inclusiveness of educational services, from early childhood, and the capacity of these services to overcome cultural and societal discriminations.

Findings of the analysis show that inequalities in children's abilities and skills start to form and develop in the early years of life, and are greatly nurtured by the socio-economic status of the child's parents, and the environment where the child is born and grows up. However, the cycle of disadvantage can be reversed by ensuring equal access to quality – and inclusive – ECEC along with policies tackling structural inequalities, through female employment, income support at market level, social protection, and work-life balance.

A Child Union is the progressive response to fighting inequalities among children. It should provide every child with the same opportunities to acquire the necessary skills and abilities to be an active citizen, and an agent of change towards fairness, solidarity, sustainability and resilience. A Child Union therefore represents one of the pillars of the new welfare paradigm, protecting and equipping children, and thus the entire community.

According to the findings of our study, a Child Union must be centred upon three main principles in order to be effective:

1. Ensure access to quality ECEC for disadvantaged children
2. Make ECEC interact positively with social protection and labour policies to tackle structural inequalities as risk factors for children's development
3. Guarantee equal access to quality and inclusive ECEC services.

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The cycle of disadvantage can be reversed by ensuring equal access to quality – and inclusive – ECEC along with policies tackling structural inequalities, through female employment, income support at market level, social protection, and work-life balance.

”

III. THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF A CHILD UNION



ILLUSTRATION 2
Atelier, Diana Municipal Preschool

*Pictures from the archives of the Documentation and Educational Research Centre, Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia
© Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia.
Courtesy of Reggio Children*

3.1. ENSURE ACCESS TO ECEC FOR CHILDREN FROM DISADVANTAGED HOUSEHOLDS AND TERRITORIES

Evidence shows that access to ECEC from a young age and the number of years spent in ECEC programmes (the longer the better) have long-term beneficial effects for children from the most disadvantaged households. However, the most recent data available, at

cross-country level, outline that participation in ECEC, notably for children aged 0 to 3 years, is still limited in most EU member states.

In 2018, only half of EU member states reached the objective of 33% ECEC coverage. In nine countries, participation in childcare was 20% or less, with Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia accounting for 10.8%, 9.1% and 1.4% respectively (Fig.7).³⁵

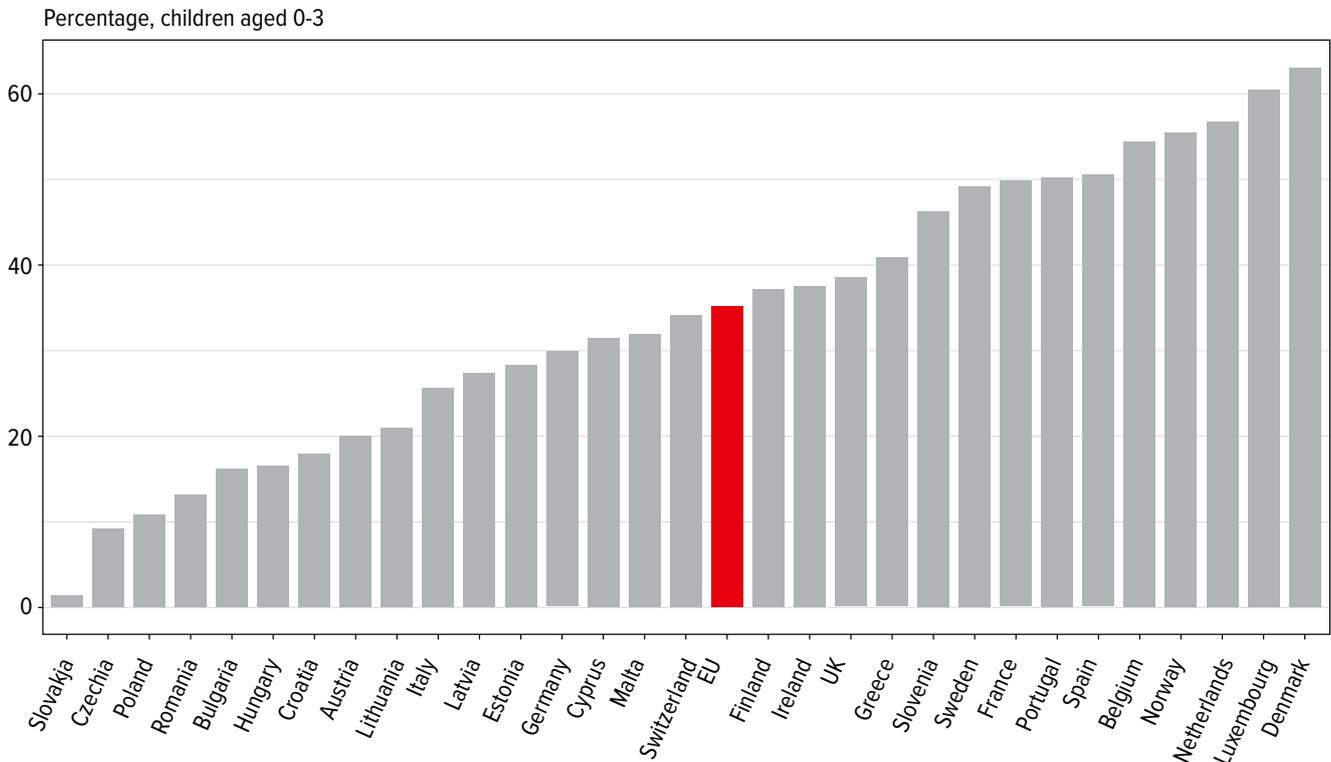
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In 2018, only half of EU member states reached the objective of 33 % ECEC coverage

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³⁵ Eurostat, EU-SILC 2018.

Figure 7 - Share of children in childcare programmes



(Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC 2018)

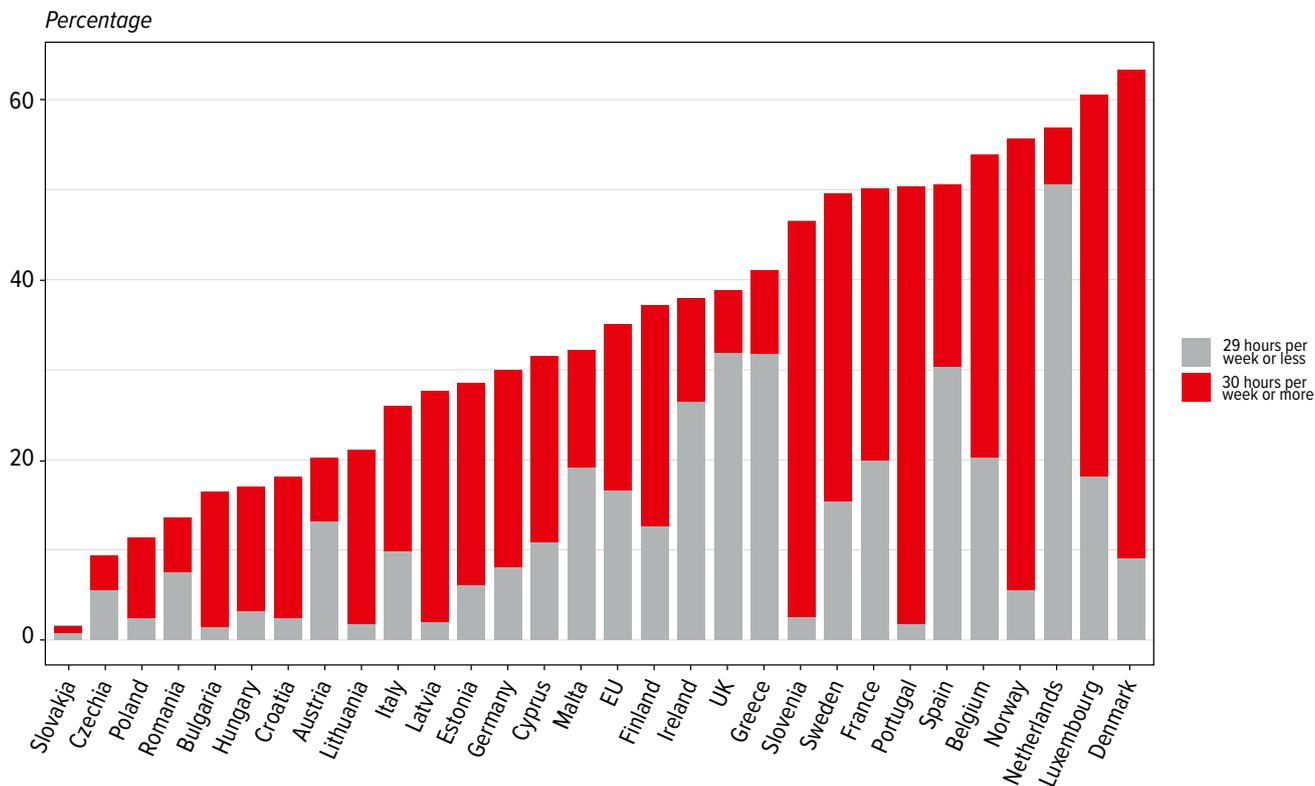
However, it is important to note that in many EU member states where the goal of 33% attendance has been reached, most children are enrolled in less intensive programmes, and are therefore offered a service of fewer than 30 hours a week (also undermining the work-life balance for parents) (Fig. 8). More importantly, in some member states, private services (or privately managed) are prevalent. In Spain, for example, more than half of children from 0 to 3 years of age are enrolled in ECEC services, but most of these services are privately managed and offer programmes for fewer than 30 hours a week. In addition, 15 % of children are in private settings without any subsidy being provided to parents.³⁶

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**Availability of ECEC services
 across Europe is greater
 for children from already
 advantaged socio-economic
 backgrounds, but less for
 those who are more in need.**
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³⁶ Save the Children Spain (2019), Donde Todo Empieza. Educación infantil de 0 a 3 años para igualar oportunidades (https://www.savethechildren.es/sites/default/files/imce/donde_todo_empieza_0.pdf)

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Figure 8 - Share of children in childcare programmes, per hours of service



(Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC 2018)

Children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are therefore particularly penalised. In the UK, 34% of children aged 0 to 3 years old, from the top income quintile, participate in ECEC programmes, compared to only 5% of those from the bottom income quintile. The UK shows the highest inequality ratio in attendance at European level, followed by Romania, the Czech Republic and France. In the latter, the percentages are 79% vs. 19%. However, differences are also present, although less marked, in the Nordic ‘egalitarian bastions’, where ECEC services (public) are historically well developed. In Denmark for example, 72% of children from more advantaged households participate in childcare programmes. This percentage decreases to 65% for children living in households in the bottom income quintile.³⁷

In short, availability of ECEC services across Europe is greater for children from already advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, but less for those who are more in need. This is the so-called ‘Matthew Effect’.

“For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” (Matthew 25:29)

According to recent studies,³⁸ this phenomenon characterises most of the EU member states and it is determined by a number of factors – firstly, the availability and affordability of ECEC services. In countries where there is a shortage of places (for example, in the Netherlands or to some extent Belgium), waiting lists are longer,

37 Van Lancker, W. and Ghysels, J. (2016), ‘Explaining patterns of inequality in childcare service use across 31 developed economies: A welfare state perspective’, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715216674252>.)

38 Pavolini, E. and Van Lancker, W. (2018), ‘The Matthew effect in childcare use: a matter of policies or preferences?’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(6).

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***EU member states
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and affordability (and
therefore accessibility)
for children from
lower socio-economic
households.***

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particularly affecting lower socio-economic households in which parents generally have less flexible employment arrangements. In addition, according to a recent OECD study, the costs for enrolling children in childcare, across the European Union, is equivalent to 10-15% of an average family's available income. In some EU member states, the costs might exceed 20-30% of available monthly income.³⁹ A lack of available places and growing costs (and also indirect costs, such as transport and meals) are often associated with systems that favour market-based solutions for ECEC services (and therefore a higher financial participation from families) in combination with policies aimed at enhancing the 'free choice' of parents through vouchers or tax deductions related to childcare attendance. However, recent studies from Finland, a country that has experimented in recent years with 'free choice' schemes (providing cash to parents who might decide not to take up ECEC), show a substantial increase in inequalities, both in access to ECEC and in learning outcomes. In short, there has been more use of the 'Home Care Allowance' (Kotihoidontuki) among low-income parents than middle-class households (1.4 times more), and also more use of it among single parents (double). Similar patterns have been observed in the Netherlands, where a system of vouchers and tax benefits is in place.⁴⁰

The commodification of ECEC services not only contributes to the exclusion of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but also of children living in marginalised territories, where costs do not match benefits. As a result, in most of EU member states, a divide can be observed in the distribution of ECEC services (and in their quality), tending to favour more affluent contexts (cities in particular) and to penalise rural or urban peripheral areas (for example, in France) or specific differences (in the case of Spain or Italy, where poorer regions also face a shortage of places in ECEC services).

By contrast, EU member states in which publicly led ECEC services are prevalent experience fewer barriers, in terms of both availability and affordability (and therefore accessibility) for children from lower socio-economic

households. This is the case of EU member states such as the Nordics or Slovenia, in which the approach to ECEC provision is more child-rights based (where children have legal entitlements to ECEC) than demand-based. While this might also include financial participation from families, it is marginal (in respect to monthly income) and progressive (with minimal participation contributions for more disadvantaged families). In Sweden, for example, families' financial participation is set at 3%, 2% or 1% of the combined income of the household for the first, second and third child respectively, and parents without income or supported by social security do not pay fees for childcare at all. In Germany, the federal government has recently adopted measures to support the Länder financially in

39 OECD (2016), *Who uses childcare? Background brief on inequalities in the use of formal early childhood education and care (ECEC) among very young children*, Paris: OECD.

40 Närvi, J. (2014), 'Äidit kotona ja työssä – perhevapaavalinnat, työtilanteet ja hoivaihanteet' [Mothers at home and work – decisions about family leave, work-life situations and ideals of care], *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka* 79(5), 543-552.

Terävä, J., Kuukka, A. and Alasuutari, M. (2018), 'Miten lastenhoidon ratkaisuja saa perustella? Vanhempien puhe 1–2-vuotiaan lapsensa hoitoratkaisuista' [Talk about childcare choices. Finnish parents' justifications for their childcare decisions], *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka, Special issue on Childcare Policies*, 83(4), 349-359 (<http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe2018092036136>)

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ensuring parents are partially or totally exempt from child-care fees.⁴¹ Other examples can be observed in Slovenia, where additional funds (or funds in kind, such as transport) are provided to ECEC services that host Roma children; in Hungary, where settings with children in disadvantage receive between 105% and 150% of normal funding; and in Belgium (Flemish Community) where requirements are made for ECEC settings to allocate 20% of places to children from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds.⁴²

Proportionate universal ECEC might also contribute to spreading ECEC services among other disadvantaged groups, in particular children living in remote, rural or peripheral areas, which generally lack services and opportunities. While providing additional resources for children most in need, the universal aspect would ensure that consensus is built on the need to expand and support services among the middle classes and top earners too.

It is essential also to pay attention to the need for flexibility in both the admission criteria and the organisation of the service itself (for example, opening hours). In many cases, the lack of flexibility and the tendency to organise ECEC to reflect the work-life balance, is not favourable to children with unemployed parents (or with just one employed) or to single parents.⁴³ In addition, in some countries (and municipalities), admission criteria tend openly (or sometimes in an underhand way) to discriminate against children from migrant backgrounds, or children who have recently arrived.

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While providing additional resources for children most in need, the universal aspect would ensure that consensus is built on the need to expand and support services among the middle classes and top earners too.

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41 Eurydice (2015, 2019), Key data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe. (https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/key-data-early-childhood-education-and-care-europe---2019-edition_en)

42 European Commission Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/experts-groups/2011-2013/ecec/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf)

43 Vandenbroeck, M. and Lazzari, A. (2014), 'Accessibility of early childhood education and care: a state of affairs', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 22(3), p.327-335.

CHILD UNION IN ACTION: EQUAL ACCESS TO ECEC

Progressives must promote:

- Child rights and legal entitlement rather than demand-driven ECEC
- The expansion of public services rather than private provision (acting against the commodification and marketisation of ECEC)
- Direct subsidies to services rather than subsidies to parents (fighting the rhetoric of ‘free choice’)
- Proportionate universalism, where universal services (with means-tested fees) are accompanied by additional resources for disadvantaged children (with a lower socio-economic status and territorially marginalised) to build consensus also among the middle class and top earners
- Flexibility in the organisation of services to facilitate the access of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (and also of those with parents temporarily or long-term unemployed or with irregular employment status).

3.2. MAKE ECEC INTERACT POSITIVELY WITH SOCIAL PROTECTION AND LABOUR POLICIES TO TACKLE STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES AS RISK FACTORS FOR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

As the findings of our analysis have shown, in order to be effective in tackling structural inequalities ECEC services must be complemented by policies addressing the root causes of children's disadvantage, and protecting the most disadvantaged parents and households during downturns. These policies must focus in particular on increasing parents' economic resources, along with improving the quality of time that parents can spend with children,⁴⁴ as also outlined by the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Commission's Recommendation Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage. Now that Europe is facing the worst health and economic crisis in its recent history, these policies are even more salient today in order to protect the most disadvantaged households (and children) from the hardship of the recession, and in order to preserve social cohesion.

As Ed Zigler, Yale University professor and one of the founders of the Head Start programme, which promotes the participation of children from low-income families in preschool education in the US, said: “Is there a magic potion that will push poor children into the ranks of the middle class? Only if the potion contains” [not only childcare but also] “sufficient income for every family (...) support [for] parents in all their roles (...) Without these necessities, only magic will make that happen.”⁴⁵

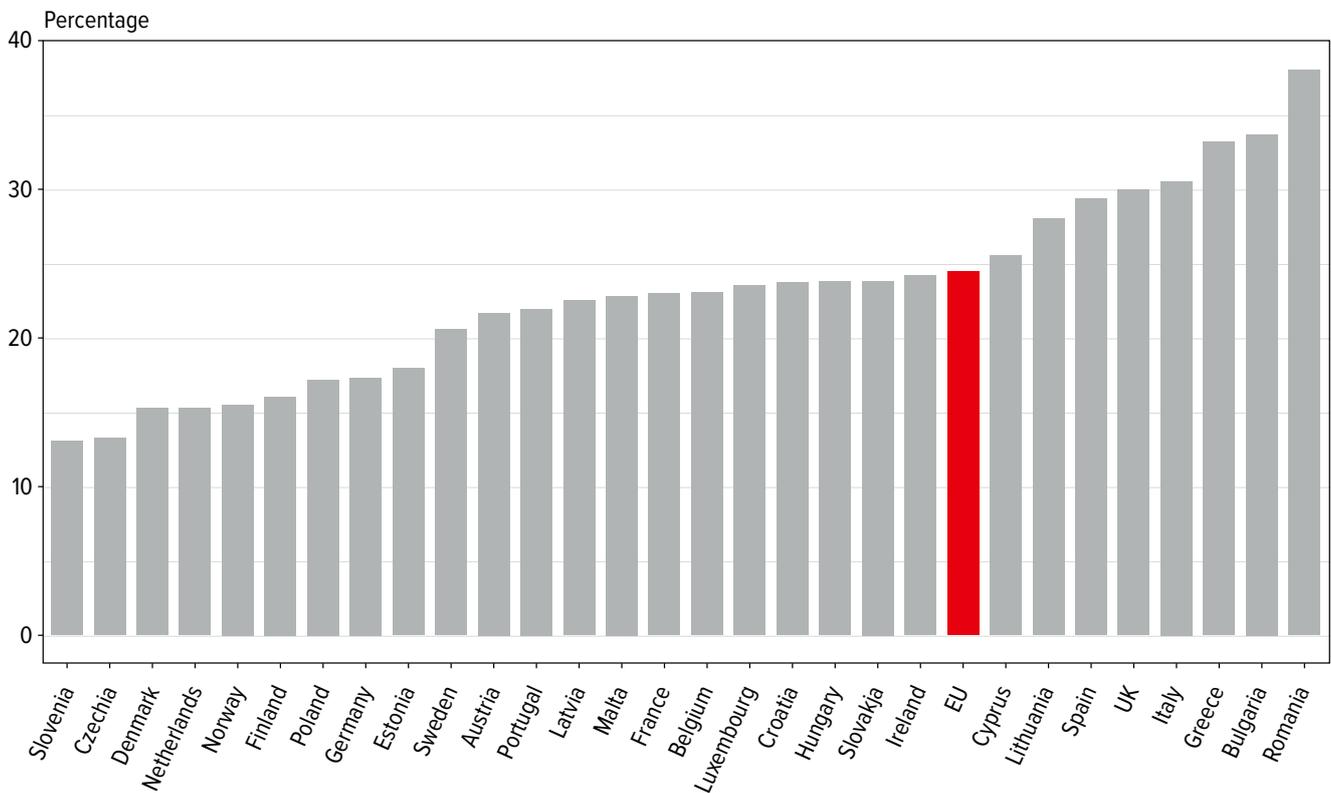
Data show, however, that in Europe almost 23 million children are at risk of poverty and social exclusion (24.3%), with this percentage exceeding 30% in four countries (Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania). There has been little improvement in the rate of child poverty in Europe in the last decade, and the socio-economic crisis induced by covid-19 will certainly exacerbate these figures. As Fig. 9 illustrates, the incidence of poverty among children is significant also in countries with a high GDP per capita, such as Ireland and Luxembourg.

44 COFACE (2017), ‘Families on the Edge. Building a Comprehensive European Work-Life Balance Reality’, Position Paper, March (http://www.coface-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/COFACE-paper_Families-on-the-edge_v4.pdf)

45 Zigler, E. (2003), ‘Forty years of believing in magic is enough!’, *Social Policy Report* XVII, 1 (10).

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Figure 9 - Share in Children at Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion



(Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC 2018)

This is because structural inequalities are not moulded by GDP, but rather labour and welfare policies. Critical in this respect, is the level of adequacy (in terms of financial resources allocated) and efficiency of social protection in providing safety nets for the most disadvantaged households with children. Social protection is provided through unemployment and family-related benefits, sickness and invalidity benefits, education-related benefits, housing allowance and social assistance. Nevertheless, in 10 countries in the EU (Spain, Portugal, Malta, Czechia, Romania, Slovakia, Greece, Croatia, Latvia and Italy), the percentage of children at risk of poverty before social benefits are received decreases by less than 10 percentage points after social benefits are paid, showing the weakness of welfare protection.

Labour also plays a major role in shaping poverty and structural inequalities. Unemployment increases the financial burdens of the most disadvantaged households, and consequently undermines opportunities to invest in children’s skills and abilities. However, data highlight that being employed does not necessarily guarantee households an escape from poverty and disadvantage. The stagnation of salaries, low paid jobs, and work precariousness (which are also due to the loss of influence of trade unions), along with cuts in welfare support and an increase in living costs, especially housing, have put a substantial number of working parents – and thus their children – at risk of poverty or of being socially excluded.⁴⁶ In the EU, working poor households are a gloomy reality. Almost 10% of workers aged 18 years or over are at risk of poverty. In some countries, such as Greece, Spain,

⁴⁶ FEPS and TASC (2018), ‘Precarious work precarious lives: how policy can create more security’, (https://www.feps-europe.eu/resources/publications/656-com_publications.publications.html)

“

Critical in this respect, is the level of adequacy (in terms of financial resources allocated) and efficiency of social protection in providing safety nets for the most disadvantaged households with children.

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Italy, Romania, the UK and Luxembourg, the percentage of in-work risk of poverty is above 12%.⁴⁷ Women are particularly at risk, as they constitute 85% of all single parents households, which tend to be more exposed to poverty and social exclusion⁴⁸. Unemployment, precarious work and low paid jobs also affect the capacity of parents to enrol children in ECEC, as the access criteria in many services discriminate against children with parents who are not in full time employment, or, in the case of market-based services, the criteria discriminate against children with parents who are not able to afford financial participation.

Particularly disadvantaged are women, who face higher barriers to enter (and stay in) the labour market, and who suffer from gender pay gaps. In 15 European countries, unemployment is higher among women than men (reaching the largest gap in Italy, 2.1 percentage points, Spain, 3.3 pp, and Greece, 8.8 pp).⁴⁹ In high-income countries, 23.8% of full-time women workers are in low-paid jobs compared to 14.7% of men⁵⁰. The combination of discriminatory practices (in both availability and accessibility) towards participation in ECEC, and in the labour market, strengthens current and future gender inequalities. According the European Institute for Gender Equality: “Women still dominate part-time employment, being consigned to jobs with poorer career progression. Women’s disproportionate responsibility for care of dependent

family members and household tasks is a major disadvantage. Being a parent continues to hinder women, but not men, in the labour market. The largest gender gap in the full time equivalent employment rates is noted in couples with children”.⁵¹ Despite traditional beliefs that identify mothers’ home care as the optimal setting for child well-being, conclusive evidence from research shows that female employment, even though reducing the time spent by mothers in childcare, enriches the quality and intensity of the relationship between mother and child, and also enhances the relational involvement of fathers.⁵²

Ensuring employment, decent salaries and social protection is essential for addressing structural risk factors for children’s development. However, these policies must be also complemented by measures enhancing the work-life balance, parental leave for both parents and other flexible working arrangements. Apart from opening employment opportunities, notably for women (and thus also increasing a household’s disposable income), these policies (coordinated with ECEC) fundamentally improve the quality of family relations (of both mothers and fathers with their children) and consequently enhance children’s well-being. Nevertheless, in many EU countries, parental leave is either inadequate in terms of duration or pay (as a percentage of salary) and very often excludes some typologies of jobs (for example, freelance workers). In addition, these parental leave schemes disproportionately

47 Eurostat (2019), Labour Force Survey.

48 EIGE “Poverty, gender and lone parents in the EU”

49 Ibid.

50 ILO (2019) A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality

51 European Institute for Gender Equality (2019). Gender Equality Index 2019 – Work Life Balance. (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-report>)

52 Waldfogel, J. (2004), ‘Social Mobility, Opportunities, and the Early Years’, CASE paper (88), Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

III. THE THREE PRINCIPLES OF A CHILD UNION

focus on mothers, and provide a limited number of paternal leave options (resulting in only 10% of fathers in the EU taking leave).⁵³ Only in Scandinavian countries are both parents totally eligible for parental leave, followed by Slovenia where more than 80% of mothers and fathers are eligible, while the percentage decreases on average to around 65% in the EU.⁵⁴

Economic empowerment and higher labour market participation, especially for women, wage solidarity and generous parental leave schemes, along with expanded and effective social protection systems dealing with measures that reduce living costs, in particular for housing,⁵⁵ would reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion among children, and better equip countries to face crises. A number of countries, in particular the Nordics, and also Slovenia, which experience lower poverty among children, have high participation rates in ECEC. This demonstrates that the most effective way to fight inequalities is to provide positive interaction between ECEC and public policies within a welfare state paradigm that focuses on both equipping and protecting children and societies. The combination (and coordination) of policies, at national but also, as very often happens, at local and community level, increases the chances for disadvantaged children to benefit not only from quality learning in ECEC services, but also from the stimuli at home due to the enhanced quality of time and relations with their parents. This reinforces the role of parents as co-constructors of knowledge and values, laying the foundation for collective resilience and transformative changes towards social justice.

CHILD UNION IN ACTION: POSITIVE INTERACTION BETWEEN ECEC AND WELFARE

Progressives must promote:

- The expansion of social protection policies to ensure safety nets for people at risk of poverty and social exclusion; the reinforcement of social housing to reduce the living costs of low-income families
- A universal basic income for children or income support schemes benefitting children
- Active labour market policies (ALMPs) to stimulate employment, particularly female employment
- A statutory minimum wage set at a living wage threshold in every member state, in order to reduce in-work poverty
- The eradication of gender pay gaps
- The work-life balance, adequate parental leave (for both mothers and fathers) in terms of time, flexibility and economic resources.

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Conclusive evidence from research shows that female employment, even though reducing the time spent by mothers in childcare, enriches the quality and intensity of the relationship between mother and child, and also enhances the relational involvement of fathers.

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⁵³ World Bank Indicators (2019).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Fahey, T., Nolan, B. and Maitre, B. (2004), 'Housing expenditures and income poverty in EU countries', *Journal of Social Policy*, 33(3), 437-454.

3.3. GUARANTEE EQUAL ACCESS TO QUALITY – AND INCLUSIVE – ECEC SERVICES

As we have seen from the empirical analysis, access to ECEC services for children from the most disadvantaged households and territories, together with welfare and labour policies, are an indispensable condition for reducing inequalities across generations. However, access to ECEC alone might in itself be insufficient to equalise opportunities, if services are of low quality – as is often the case. Indeed, poor quality ECEC provision “may do more harm than good and increase inequalities”.⁵⁶

As outlined in the European Commission Quality Framework, quality has three facets.

- Structural quality, which refers to how ECEC services are organised, in terms of the number of staff involved, their training and qualifications, and their ratio to children; the design of the physical environment such as the class size including safety requirements, and the learning materials; the curriculum; and financing rules. Structural quality is often (or should be) transposed into standards to be fulfilled by service providers in order for them to be accredited and licensed.
- Process quality, which oversees learning and teaching practices within ECEC services. In short, this involves the pedagogical approach adopted by staff to implement the curriculum and share learning with the children, as well as the modalities of interaction between the staff and parents (and between the children and their parents), the use of learning material and space, and the daily activities.
- Outcome quality, which outlines the ultimate objective of ECEC – to ensure that children acquire certain skill sets and competences.

Structure and process quality respectively represent the hardware and software of ECEC programming towards expected learning outcomes. Yet, depending on the ‘choice’ of what children should learn and achieve in terms of skills and competences, both structure and process quality might assume different forms. This choice has ‘political’ implications (and is oriented by political considerations).

For progressives, quality is centred around the principle of inclusion. Inclusion is the capacity of ECEC to promote the full development and learning potential of every child regardless of their socio-economic or demographic background, the place where they live or the place from which they come. Inclusive services enable every child to feel welcome and accepted, to overcome barriers, which are mostly socially constructed, to become emancipated, and to become an active agent of collective change and resilience. Inclusion is thus not only about individual competences, but also about fostering democratic values, dialogue, respect for diversity and solidarity.

There is a consensus among policymakers and experts that traditional competences, such as basic numeracy and literacy, are no longer sufficient to allow children to grow up and live in a rapidly changing world that is characterised by knowledge, innovation and connectedness. Inclusive outcomes therefore refer to the need for children, notably those living in socio-economically disadvantaged households, to be equipped with the so-called competences for the 21st century. For these children, as well as for those who are better off, early childhood education should also foster citizenship, including solidarity and cooperation.

Apart from the classical competences of early literacy and numeracy, and science, children must also therefore acquire multi-literacy skills such as digital, financial, and media literacy. In addition, they must acquire self-agency or the capacity to face and analyse demands of one environment and apply resources to take appropriate action, by also using different tools such as intellectual, cultural, religious, linguistic, material, technical, fiscal, physical and virtual resources.

Children also need to foster their socio-emotional skills. These involve the ability to cooperate, interact socially and communicate with others, as well as creativity, curiosity, self-esteem, motivation, adaptability and the ability to manage stress. These are the skills that have the greatest long-term positive effects on life chances, particularly for children who are the most economically disadvantaged.

Since the historical goal of progressive forces is to transform economies and societies so that they become sustainable and fair, inclusive outcomes should therefore not only aim at providing disadvantaged children

⁵⁶ European Commission Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.

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with key skills to ‘manage’ their current situation by being ready for school or prepared for future learning and adult productive life, but also, and more importantly, inclusive outcomes should aim at providing children with key skills to strengthen their role as agents of change and collective resilience.

Accordingly, progressives must promote learning outcomes which reflect the ability of children to bring positive transformation to societies, through solidarity, fairness, justice, social cohesion, acceptance of others, inter-culturalism, and the protection of nature. These are, in part, what the OECD has recently labelled ‘Global Competences’ or the ability of “individuals to examine local, global and intercultural issues, understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action toward sustainability and collective well-being”.⁵⁷

WHAT ARE THE GLOBAL COMPETENCES?⁵⁸

Global Competences: four target dimensions of global competence that people need to apply successfully in their everyday life:

- 1. the capacity to examine issues and situations of local, global and cultural significance (e.g. poverty, economic interdependence, migration, inequality, environmental risks, conflicts, cultural differences and stereotypes);**
- 2. the capacity to understand and appreciate different perspectives and world views;**
- 3. the ability to establish positive interactions with people of different national, ethnic, religious, social or cultural backgrounds or gender; and**
- 4. the capacity and disposition to take constructive action toward sustainable development and collective well-being.**

Examples of inclusive curricula can be found in Germany. Adopted by all Länder, the German curriculum centres learning objectives on three main concepts: *Erziehung* (socialisation), *Bildung* (education), and *Betreuung* (care). The first, socialisation, aims at empowering the social role of the child as an active citizen. Further progress has been made in the city of Berlin, where emphasis has been given to promoting democratic values and respect for diversity.⁵⁹ Similarly the Swedish preschool curriculum focuses much attention on the development of norms and democratic values as part of children’s learning patterns, with specific reference to justice and equality. It also focuses on the ability of children to elaborate and express views, in a democratic and cooperative manner, and thus influence decision-making about their own lives.⁶⁰

Competences are only one side of the inclusion coin. The way in which knowledge is transmitted to children is also a crucial factor enabling inclusion. The process and structural quality of ECEC in this respect must be set in a way that supports children’s emancipation through participation and empowerment.⁶¹

Loris Malaguzzi, an Italian pedagogue who inspired the Reggio Children Approach, argues that children, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds, are often seen as fragile individuals who just need protection and help. Instead “a child needs and wants connections with other children and adults; a citizen with a place in society, a subject of rights whom the society must respect and support”.⁶²

As the main engine of process quality, pedagogy must therefore be founded upon the idea that knowledge should not simply be transmitted but co-constructed with the child, with the objective, on the one hand of enabling the child to acquire the necessary skills and competences to grow up and live in the 21st century, and on the other hand, and more importantly, enabling the child to become emancipated and strengthened in their role as agents of change for social justice and collective resilience.⁶³

The content of learning should be discussed with children in a democratic process with regard to age and

57 OECD (2018), *Preparing our Youth for an Inclusive and Sustainable World. The OECD PISA global competence framework*. (<https://www.oecd.org/education/global-competency-for-an-inclusive-world.pdf>)

58 Ibid.

59 Prott, R. and Preissing, C. (2006), *Bridging Diversity: an early childhood curriculum* [Berliner Bildungsprogramm]. Berlin: Verlag das Netz.

60 OECD (2004), *Starting Strong. Curricula and Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education and Care. Five Curriculum Outlines*, Paris: OECD.

61 European Commission (2013), *Commission Recommendation Investing in Children. Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* (2013/112/EU)

62 Malaguzzi, L. (2004), *Children in Europe*.

63 Bennet, J. (2013), ‘Early Childhood Curriculum for Children from Low-Income and Immigrant Background’, *Transatlantic Forum of Early Years*, New York, 10-12 July.

maturity and the different learning trajectories. Children should therefore have the chance to be involved in and to shape the learning process. Learning must be developed through a series of experiences (learning by experiencing), playing and playful activities (learning by doing and playing), enabling the child to be connected in the ECEC firstly with other children, and then with the child's 'outside world', their family, the community and nature.

Such processes require a review of the role (and competences) of adults working in preschool education or in childcare. There should be more observers and facilitators, understanding (and respecting) the children and their diversity, stimulating natural curiosity, promoting participation and cooperation, instead of mere transmitters of notions. Observation is a critical skill in inclusive education because it allows teachers and caretakers to 'meet children where they are', recognise (and respect) differences and sources of disadvantage, and therefore co-construct the knowledge that fits each individual child's need, and strengthen the child's emancipation.⁶⁴

If children are agents of change, then so are the people working with them. These people's role in nurturing the foundation of sustainable, just and resilient economies and societies, must be recognised. This obviously requires investment in their professional training (and re-skilling) – for example, training on inclusive pedagogical practices. More importantly, it also requires the enhancement of their working status, in particular the improvement of their salary conditions, which are very often lower than those of teachers employed in primary education – especially in split systems where childcare is separated from preschool and basic education, or in countries where services are increasingly marketised and commodified.⁶⁵ Like in many other feminized occupations, salaries in ECEC are lower and the upper echelons are occupied by men⁶⁶. For progressives it is therefore essential to work with trade unions in developing an improvement in the conditions of ECEC staff, enhancing their well-being and capacity to work with diversity.

Such processes must be supported by inclusive structures, in the form of learning environments. The

environment is the 'third educator' (after parents and educators)⁶⁷ and must favour the centrality of the child in their learning trajectory. This can be done, for example, by rearranging the space in order to create corners which are attractive for children, and by bringing them to carry out experiments, working together, and learning through doing and playing. It can be also done outside the ECEC premises, in outdoor playgrounds, as well as in urban surroundings (public areas, or parks). Learning material must also embrace and respect diversity and nature (for example, through the use of recycled materials).⁶⁸

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There should be more observers and facilitators, understanding (and respecting) the children and their diversity, stimulating natural curiosity, promoting participation and cooperation, instead of mere transmitters of notions.

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64 OECD (2004), op. cit.

65 European Union Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.

66 Coffey A. & James D. (2014). Masculinity and Education. Routledge.

67 <https://www.reggiochildren.it/reggio-emilia-approach/>

68 Bennet, J. (2013), op. cit.

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A DIVERSITY CHECKLIST

(from Bennet, *Transatlantic Forum on Early Years*)

- Check all the imagery on the walls, play materials, jigsaws, food, toys, books. Have they been selected with diversity in mind? Make certain that images of children with special needs are included and that immigrant life is illustrated in a positive way.
- Keep in mind language issues in labelling equipment, room names, groups, etc.
- Provide attractive toys and equipment for both girls and boys.
- Examine what messages are being given or not given in the children's books and texts provided.
- Ensure that the necessary environmental adaptations have been made for children with visual impairment or with a disability.
- Ensure that at least one member of staff has been trained in sign language.
- Information for families and children: does it exist? Is it accessible? Is there someone available to help illiterate parents?
- Books and materials for children: Are materials accessible to all children? Are they placed at eye level and within reach of young children? Are they clearly labelled, both pictorially and in letters?

Source: Adapted from the Office of the Minister of Children (2006), *Ireland: Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Child-care Providers*

The above-described inclusive, progressive and pedagogical approaches – also known as socio-pedagogical approaches – notably diverge from more sequential approaches, in which knowledge is directed from teachers to children, with the latter therefore being mere recipients of a learning based on a predefined idea of the 'normal' development of the child, which is very often transposed from primary education. By not 'meeting children where they are', these sequential approaches reduce children's motivation and ability to learn. This is particularly the case for those children in the most disadvantaged situations, and inequalities are therefore increased. These sequential approaches are also less resilient to crises, as seen during the covid-19 pandemic and the lockdowns applied in most EU countries, because sequential approaches are less adaptable at dealing with abrupt changes in learning means (for example, distance and online learning). They are also less adaptable at dealing with the reorganisation of educational programmes, thus increasing the learning loss particularly of children living in households with less financial means or cultural capital.

Inclusive and progressive approaches towards ECEC were developed in Italy after the second world war, particularly in the region of Emilia Romagna, the heartland of the 'Reggio Children Approach'⁶⁹, and in the Scandinavian countries, especially Sweden. Recent examples can be found in Germany (Berlin in particular), and in Slovenia, where the national preschool curriculum, which is employed for the entire ECEC cycle (for childcare and preschool education), emphasises specifically the need to consider children's own needs rather than pre-established learning standards.

69 <https://www.reggiochildren.it/reggio-emilia-approach/>

Working on and within inclusive processes and structures also allows ECEC services to understand and promote dialogue and interaction with the children's 'outside world' – particularly with families. This can facilitate the co-construction of a positive learning environment at home, which is essential for children's development and well-being. It also reinforces the motivation and support of public opinion towards ECEC. In addition, it facilitates positive interactions between ECEC and other welfare services and policies, enabling structural inequalities and root causes of disadvantage to be tackled, and enabling collective resilience to be built. This has been the case in the Nordic countries or Slovenia, for example, where ECEC is embedded in the welfare state system. It has also been the case with projects undertaken in Belgium (see the case of the city of Ghent), where ECEC is coordinated with other welfare services that reach out in particular to low-income households and marginalised territories and groups.

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Working on and within inclusive processes and structures also allows ECEC services to understand and promote dialogue and interaction with the children's 'outside world' – particularly with families.

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CHILD UNION IN ACTION: EQUAL ACCESS TO QUALITY AND INCLUSION

Progressives must promote:

- Inclusive learning outcomes and curricula, focusing on skills enabling children to grow up and live in the 21st century, but also strengthening their role as agents of change towards more just, sustainable and resilient societies and economies by promoting competences such as respect for diversity, cooperation and solidarity
- Structural quality accompanied by process quality aiming at co-constructing knowledge with the children and promoting their emancipation and role as agents of democratic and progressive change
- Inclusive pedagogical practices rather than sequential learning, enabling the needs of every child to be met, notably for those living in disadvantaged households or territories, and enabling ECEC to be connected with the child's 'outside world' (families, communities, welfare)
- Inclusive learning environments, as the 'third educator' (after teachers and parents) to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge and learning by experience
- Staff training and recognition of the staff's role of co-agent of change (with the child), through a charter ensuring rights, adequate salaries and working conditions, and a strengthened role for trade unions
- Recognition of the role of parents and communities as educators and agents of change, and thus as a fundamental pillar of ECEC – in particular by stimulating the democratic involvement of parents and communities in decision-making about educational projects and also by actively encouraging their participation in learning activities.

IV. CHILD UNION IN ACTION: PROGRESSIVE LEADERS AND PRACTICES ACROSS EUROPE



ILLUSTRATION 3
4 years old Classroom, Municipal Preschool at the
Loris Malaguzzi International Centre

*Pictures from the archives of the Documentation and Educational Research Centre,
Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia
© Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia.
Courtesy of Reggio Children*

Children are the pillar upon which collective resilience and a renewed idea of solidarity can be constructed.

A Child Union is the progressive response to the need to equalise life chances and promote the emancipation of all children through their participation in inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care. It also addresses structural inequalities and risk factors for children's holistic development.

To enact a Child Union, progressives need to design policies, at local, national and European level, to ensure access to ECEC for disadvantaged children – those living in lower income households, or marginalised territories. In addition, *"Progressives must guarantee that ECEC services are high quality, meaning that they are inclusive and are thus able to meet the specific needs of each child while empowering that child to become an agent of changes for more sustainable and just economies and societies."* ECEC policies must be complemented by, and positively interact with, labour and welfare policies that tackle the root causes of inequalities among children.

Yet progressive can only address the above challenges effectively if they consider ECEC as an essential element of a renewed welfare paradigm. This paradigm should promote equality by equipping citizens and territories to seize opportunities from the global economy, while also protecting them against potential, and more frequently

regular, downturns and losses.

Many progressive leaders across Europe are at the forefront of the fight against children's inequalities, and they strongly defend investment to promote ECEC. The champions of a Child Union can be found in national governments, as can be seen in Slovenia, in a small rural town in Belgium, or in cities across Italy, Hungary and Spain. These champions form a community of progressive practices which can serve as inspiration for other leaders and activists.

4.1. UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO ECEC AND WELFARE POLICIES TO TACKLE INEQUALITIES AMONG CHILDREN: SLOVENIA

Slovenia has had a long history of investing in ECEC since the end of the second world war. With massive infrastructure (re)building, industrialisation and urbanisation in the 1960s, and with employment on the rise, the Slovenian government decided to establish kindergarten. ECEC was seen as an essential set of services to allow women, in particular, to work. The Slovenian programme of expanding childcare and preschools was inspired by the Scandinavian model (notably that of Sweden).

In the mid-1990s, a number of reforms were introduced

in Slovenia to strengthen the quality of the ECEC system. These reforms were made under the impulse of progressives, especially progressive women's organisations and other women's organisations. The reforms made Slovenia one of the few EU countries where the ECEC system is unified. The entity responsible for ECEC is the Ministry of Education, which provides common policy and legal instruments at national level – for example, the curriculum framework (adapted for each age group), standards and regulations. As is often the case across Europe, municipalities are in charge of setting up kindergartens and implementing ECEC programmes.

This unitary system in Slovenia provides children with a coherent learning pattern, from 11 months of age to children's entrance into primary education (and beyond, bridging the gap between early and basic education through the supervision of the Ministry of Education).



The objective of the reform was to make concrete the stated right of every child in Slovenia to have access to quality, and age-appropriate, ECEC.

Equal access is ensured by universal admission and services subsidised by the state. Public services (which host 95% of children applying) are accompanied by private provision, which is directly financed and which

is obliged to follow the same standards as the public services. The government also provides higher funding for centres with higher numbers of particularly disadvantaged children (e.g. Roma). The financial contribution of parents is means-tested in all settings (parents pay from 0 to 77% of the full price), with children from the lowest income households attending kindergarten for free. In the city of Ljubljana, additional support to reduce the price of ECEC is given to all parents who have a mortgage.

Furthermore, by standardising quality across providers (and ages), the Slovenian system guarantees that every child benefits from appropriate and adequate learning experiences. In 1999 Slovenia adopted the kindergarten curriculum, which promotes inclusive learning outcomes. In short, as well as cognitive skills and physical development (achieved also through connection with health services, and the provision of three free meals per day), children in Slovenia are stimulated to acquire the abilities of cooperating, discussing, thinking critically, acknowledging and accepting cultural, social and gender diversity, and valuing equality and solidarity. In some cities, like Ljubljana, a number of pedagogical activities are organised with the involvement of the local communities, to strengthen collective resilience. Diversity is also addressed, using native languages for children coming from Italian and Hungarian national communities. In addition, much emphasis is given to sustainability – in particular the knowledge and respect of nature, and practices protecting the environment.

Quality is also sustained by the equal treatment provided to staff employed in different services. Preschool teachers, who hold postgraduate degrees, and preschool teaching assistants with upper secondary qualifications, carry out ECEC programmes for both children aged 0-3 years, and 3-6 years. Additional staff are provided for centres where Roma children or children with special needs are enrolled. By avoiding differentiation in salaries and working conditions between childcare staff and preschool staff, the Slovenian unitary system contributes uniquely to enhancing equal access to quality.

Over recent decades the percentage of children participating in ECEC has grown more than 20 percentage

IV. CHILD UNION IN ACTION: PROGRESSIVE LEADERS AND PRACTICES ACROSS EUROPE

points, today reaching almost 50% of children from 0 to 3 years old enrolled in childcare services (of 30 hours or more per week). This is one of the highest rates in the EU. Moreover, relative inequality in intake is lower than in most of the EU member states, demonstrating that an approach based on the legal entitlements of children, accompanied by universal and state-funded services – and thus avoiding the commodification and marketisation of ECEC – is the best way of providing the same opportunities of access for all children, not only those from disadvantaged households or territories.

In addition, ECEC in Slovenia interacts positively with the country's labour policies. Through their participation in various coalition governments, occupying the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs for almost all the last decade, progressives have been particularly active in promoting coherent and complementary welfare policies – notably work-life balance measures. For example, the opening time of services is set to favour employed parents (kindergartens open between 5.30am and 6.00am and close between 4.30pm and 5.30pm, with some remaining open until 9pm). It should also be underlined that more than 85% of all employees are in full time employment (both men and women). The availability and organisation of ECEC is complemented by generous parental leave. Maternity leave lasts 105 days with financial benefits equivalent to 100 % of salary, while fathers have the right to 30 days of paternity leave. Both parents are entitled to an additional 130 days of parental leave each (in total 260 days). There is also an income support scheme for non-working mothers. In addition, Slovenia has established the minimum wage at €700 net, which is above the national poverty line. It has also established a minimum income for households falling below the national poverty line (calculated on the basis of the number of children) and 'large families' (with more than three children). These welfare policies significantly reduce the risk factors for inequalities among children, making Slovenia the EU member state with the lowest rate of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

It is the progressives who have been leading the expansion (of both services and quality) in Slovenia. As new challenges emerge – in particular, the increasing lack of places in some municipalities (especially for younger children) and difficulties in accessing services for severely disadvantaged children (for example, Roma), socially excluded or migrant children – the progressives are fighting to move the quality and equity of ECEC even further forward by proposing universal free childcare for all.

MARTINA VUK,

Former State Secretary, Slovenia:

ECEC is very important for every child. It is a programme (curricula), it is care and a programme, which is implemented by pedagogically educated professionals. This means an early socialisation for children, development of group dynamics and early education, which lowers the obstacles for children, brought from their home environment. And last but not least, ECEC gives more equal opportunities for children in early age. And that is all we want for all children – to give them a safe, educative, creative childhood with all the possibilities for their future development.

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Preschool teachers, who hold
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4.2. ENSURE ACCESS TO ECEC SERVICES FOR THE MOST DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN THROUGH PUBLIC PROVISION: BARCELONA AND GHENT

Barcelona

The ECEC system in Spain is split between preschool education (for children aged 3-6 years) and childcare (for those aged 0-3 years old). While universal coverage is ensured for preschool education, childcare suffers structural weaknesses, with territorial disparities in terms of both the availability of services and their quality.



Spain has one of the highest rates of persistent risk of child poverty in Europe, and is one of the countries where the gap between the risk of poverty between the adult and infant population is the greatest. Of all age groups, the under 18s have the highest risk of severe poverty (26.8% in 2019). Although child poverty reached its peak between 2014 and 2015, the evolution over time shows its structure. The capacity of the welfare states to alleviate child poverty has historically been low. Cash payments for families on low income with children are by far the lowest of all social security payments, and until now there has been no safety net at national level but a number of regional minimum income schemes with very different coverage and levels of generosity. On 1 June 2020 the Spanish government introduced a means-tested minimum income scheme (the Ingreso Mínimo Vital) which is

expected to reach over 800,000 households at risk of poverty. This new social security scheme will complement the pre-existing regional ones.

Inequalities in access to childcare are also extremely high. The proportion of children aged 0-3 years making use of formal childcare is much lower (26.6%) among those living in households with below 50% of the average income, compared to 57.5% in high income households. The children excluded from childcare very often come from more disadvantaged households, such as those with non-working mothers or low-educated parents. The greatest difficulty in having childcare needs covered is faced by single-parent households (53.5%) followed by numerous families (37%).

In order to increase the availability of childcare places, some cities and regions have expanded private provision, which has resulted in even more inequalities in access. Other cities and regions have focused on increasing the offer of municipal public childcare centres – with better outcomes in terms of enhancing participation among the most vulnerable children.

The case of Barcelona represents a good example of efforts to increase public – quality – provision, and to increase the uptake of low-income families and those raising children especially of migrant origin.

The regulation and financing of childcare centres/nurseries (escoles bressol) is the responsibility of the regional government. However, the sector has been under-resourced for over a decade. When Ada Colau, the leader of a municipal progressive party Barcelona en Comú won the 2015 elections with a simple majority, she committed to creating 30 new public nurseries, as promised during her campaign. Although the promise fell short, unable to find the budget that was needed, efforts to strengthen the public network of nurseries continued in the following legislature, when Colau was able to keep the local government in coalition with the socialists of the PSC.

The local administration of Barcelona has been increasing its share of the childcare budget. In 2017, 62% of the total cost of municipal nurseries was covered by the local council and 38% by families. Between 2012 and 2013 the local council increased its share by 11.7%.

There are a total of 100 escoles bressol with 8,400 children and with an annual cost of €62 million. We estimate that the coverage rate for the 0-2 age group is 44.4% in

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Barcelona, of which 20.7% is public. Both percentages have been increasing since 2010. Nevertheless, public supply is still well under the level of demand. According to local council data, municipal provision only covers about 55% of all demand.

In addition, the local council introduced a new system of income-based fees (tarificación social) in 2015 to increase the participation of families on low income. The previous system set a single fee (€289 per month in 2015) with some bonuses according to a set of criteria that could range from 30% to 100% of the total fee. With this new system, families pay differently according to their ability, ranging from a maximum of €395 per month to a minimum of €50 euros per month.

Overall, the network of municipal nurseries in Barcelona stands out for the high quality of the nurseries' provision. Child: adult ratios are lower than in most private nurseries, and staff have medium to high level qualifications (42% are trained pre-primary schoolteachers – with a university degree – and 58% have an upper secondary qualification). Importantly, these public nurseries stem from a solid pedagogical tradition that goes back as far as the Second Spanish Republic.

Research recently conducted on the experience of Barcelona has shown that the new system has produced a more balanced presence of children from different family backgrounds. Progressives have been leading the fight to expand ECEC and equalise the life chances of children (and reduce the structural inequalities of parents).

The next challenge for progressives will be to increase the number of places further so as to avoid the possible exclusion of children from middle and high-class backgrounds, whose families praise the quality of municipal centres (with above-average standards for private nurseries) and demand access to these public services in large numbers. Possible tensions between different socio-economic groups, derived from a not-yet universal provision, might also undermine public support for spending on ECEC.

In short, child poverty and the inequalities among children of different socio-economic backgrounds need to be addressed at different levels of governance (supra-national, national and sub-national) and with all available welfare tools (from direct payments to low-income families to high-quality public services). The Barcelona case shows that whilst there are different routes to increasing

coverage rates, the commitment to directly provided childcare services can become the trademark of progressive governments. The introduction of income-based fees is a crucial mechanism to avoid any 'Matthew Effect' at this very early age. However, if there is insufficient supply of ECEC, political tensions might arise and the commitment to progressive ideals and principles might also lead to difficult choices.

LAIA ORTIZ,
Deputy Mayor of Barcelona:

Our network of municipal nurseries is a legacy for the city. (It is) a factor of equity, the first link of families to the city, and belongs to a critical mass of educational services that has learnt to innovate from within the public sector

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***Research recently conducted
on the experience of
Barcelona has shown that
the new system has produced
a more balanced presence
of children from different
family backgrounds.
Progressives have been
leading the fight to expand
ECEC and equalise the
life chances of children
(and reduce the structural
inequalities of parents).***

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Ghent

Ghent is a city of around 260,000 inhabitants, and is located in the Region of Flanders, in Belgium. It is the largest city in East Flanders, with its port (the second largest in Belgium) historically functioning as the economic pole and the core of labour movements. The city has a long tradition of cooperativism, citizens' self-governance, democratic participation and progressive policy innovations. It has been governed by progressive forces since 1989.



The Ghent city council has invested in ECEC since 1979, transforming existing medical-oriented services into educational settings, and adopting inclusive pedagogical practices centred on children's rights and emancipation. In kindergarten, the pedagogical approach is inspired by the movement of 'experience-orientated pre-school education' founded by Ferre Lavers at the University of Leuven and by the French Pedagogue Celestin Freinet. It focuses on promoting the free initiative of the child, in an enriched milieu, experience-oriented dialogue and the explicit inclusion of the social environment of the children. In childcare, the pedagogical approach is inspired by socio-constructivist movements and a concern for equal opportunities.

Today, 1150 children from age 0 to 3 years are enrolled in 32 childcare centres. In all childcare centres in the city of Ghent, whether funded by the Flemish government or private, the city has established progressivity for parental

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The Tinkerbelle scheme is an enrolment and registration system aiming to guarantee that places in childcare are also accessible to immigrant and low-income children. It also aims to promote a social mix in the childcare centres.

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fees, based on income. In addition, the municipality ensures subsidies to make extra reductions in parental fees for parents living in poverty.

However, the great diversity of the population (due to a consistent flow of migrants over recent decades) and the surge in the number of parents at risk of poverty and social exclusion (due to the 2007 financial crisis) has challenged the capacity of the ECEC system to ensure equal access. A shortage of places has left at least 10% of children without ECEC – mostly those from economically disadvantaged households or newcomers. As research has shown that the 'first come, first served' criteria largely favour children from well off families (for example, those with a higher level of education), the Ghent City Council has made a deliberate choice firstly to expand available places in disadvantaged areas of the city, and secondly to develop a coherent approach, called Tinkerbelle, to ensure the equal access of all children.

The Tinkerbelle scheme is an enrolment and registration system aiming to guarantee that places in childcare are also accessible to immigrant and low-income children. It also aims to promote a social mix in the childcare centres.

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The scheme reflects (and further develops) the regulation of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, which established criteria for access to childcare in Flanders. These criteria grant 50% to 70% of the available places to households living in close proximity of the centre, and grant the remaining places (at least 30%) to vulnerable households (low-income, low-educated and migrant families, and single parents). In addition, the scheme provides for two places in each childcare centre to be reserved for each of the groups listed below:

- immigrant parents following courses on integration and the Dutch language
- parents following training for employment
- parents in crisis, with an urgent and unforeseen need for childcare (for a maximum of three months).

The efficacy of the strategy to expand places in areas with a high incidence of risk factors, and to grant access to disadvantaged groups through the Tinkerbelle scheme, relies on the structural cooperation between ECEC services and social welfare services. Both services share the common objective of fighting inequalities. The role of the social services department is essential – firstly, to map and identify disadvantaged families and groups, and secondly to accompany them to ECEC services. For the latter, a specific project called ‘Bridging to Parents’ has been developed, deploying welfare professionals in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in order to promote parental involvement, and the participation of children in ECEC and basic education.

The capacity of local welfare structures to geo-localise the prevalence of risk factors – such as economic poverty, single parenthood, or migrant status – at the level of the neighbourhood is enhanced by a system of cross-matching the data from 13 welfare organisations and their partner organisations. The same system is used to raise the effectiveness of social payments, as well as payments for housing schemes, health and other local welfare interventions.

The connection between children and the ‘outside world’ is also guaranteed by inclusive pedagogical practices. For example, activities and materials in ECEC centres reflect the diversity of the community. Furthermore, the recruitment of staff also seeks to promote diversity. Indeed, diversity is not denied but embraced (for instance, speaking their native language with children from immigrant

backgrounds) to favour positive communication and the participation of parents as first educators, and thus emancipation.

With recent figures highlighting the success of Tinkerbelle at achieving the objective of equalising access to ECEC and guaranteeing a social mix in childcare centres, and with the rate of disadvantaged children in publicly funded childcare reaching 38% in 2018 (in contrast with the rest of Flanders where inequalities are still widespread), progressives in Ghent are now looking at the next goal, which is to move towards a universal quality ECEC provision.

ELKE DECRUYNAERE,

Member of the Ghent City Council,
Alderman for Education and Youth:

A child’s first thousand days are hugely important. High quality childcare is a key element. It has to be near the families’ homes and it has to be affordable. Also, in dialogue with the parents, it has to respect the parents’ convictions and respect their role as the main educators. There are a lot of parents in our cities who do not have a social network they can reach out to. This makes providing more services absolutely necessary. A fair system of assigning free places, with attention to a social mix, guarantees access to quality childcare for everybody.



ILLUSTRATION 4
Children at the People's Nursery School of Villa Cella (Reggio Emilia), 1947-48

*Pictures from the archives of the Documentation and Educational Research Centre, Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia
 © Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia.
 Courtesy of Reggio Children*

4.3. QUALITY AND INCLUSION: THE CITY OF REGGIO EMILIA (ITALY) AND THE 'REGGIO CHILDREN APPROACH'

The Reggio Children Approach is an educational philosophy which aims at emancipating children to deploy their full abilities as citizens. It also aims at promoting solidarity and equality.



The approach finds its historical routes in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia. In 1950s, the city council and several small villages in the surrounding areas, which were governed by progressive forces, decided to create and develop Reggio

Emilia's network of public childcare centres and preschools. This decision was inspired and driven by the women's union and women's worker associations, which were already active in organising self-managed ECEC services, notably in the rural areas in the province of Reggio Emilia. A central figure in the history of the development of ECEC in Reggio Emilia is Loris Malaguzzi, an intellectual and pedagogue who further conceptualised what would later be named the 'Reggio Children Approach'. Malaguzzi imagined ECEC not simply as a service, but as the source of the reconstruction of democratic values and institutions after fascism. The reconstruction was to be made with children and by children.

At the heart of the approach is the idea that the child is a subject of rights, and is also capable of learning and developing fully. Every child, regardless of their socio-economic status and gender, is equipped with an extraordinary potential for learning. Malaguzzi defined this as the 'one hundred languages' that the child possesses: one hundred ways of thinking, expressing, understanding and encountering otherness. This immense ability of knowledge-building and creative processes is strengthened through experiences, conducted individually or with other children, in the cultural and social context. It is therefore the goal of ECEC to nurture this ability through appropriate and inclusive pedagogical practices.

In the Reggio Children Approach, pedagogy is therefore centred on the so called *progettazione* or design, the planning of didactics in the form of experiences (the ateliers) that are co-constructed between children and their educators (by using the children's one hundred languages) rather

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than applying pre-defined learning programmes. A learning project can be inspired by a natural or family event, or something found in the news, and is proposed by one or more children together with teachers. As a result, learning is entrenched in context and in the surrounding environment. The educational programme constantly mutates, re-adapts and evaluates, following the inputs of the children, who are active participants in the creation of knowledge, and not just passive recipients of notions.

Instead of being a simple transmitter, the educator is a facilitator of the children's construction of knowledge. Teachers support children in formulating hypothesis and project work, and they organise the involvement of parents and communities. Priority is given to research in educators' work, mainly through the documentation of everyday practices, in order to evaluate and interpret the teaching, possibly reorienting and enhancing it. However, the research is also meant to render the nature of learning processes visible and shareable with children, and especially with their parents and the community, and thus transform the learning into a common emancipatory experience. The role of the educator is praised and nurtured. Accordingly, much attention is paid to the rights and well-being of workers in ECEC services. Working conditions focus on stability, continuity, and fair pay. This in turn strengthens the educators' sense of belonging to the experience.

Another essential aspect of the development of the Reggio Children Approach is the role of architecture when designing inclusive learning environments. The interior and exterior spaces of the childcare centres and preschools in Reggio Emilia are organised in interconnected forms, and are offered to children and adults as places to live together, and to search, experience and co-construct of knowledge. The environment interacts with (and it is modified by) the ateliers, or educational projects and experiences, and it serves the purpose of enacting and facilitating inclusiveness and children's empowerment, while also increasing the sense of familiarity and belonging, and the pleasure of inhabiting.

By promoting the participation of children (and of their parents' communities), as well as promoting the culture of solidarity, responsibility and inclusion, the Reggio Children Approach enhances the role of children as agents of change for fairer, sustainable and resilient societies. Inclusiveness is reflected by the capacity to emancipate children while also 'meeting children where they are' (in terms of their abilities and contexts) and thus respecting their learning needs and diversity.

ECEC in Reggio Emilia is an integrated public system. The Institution of Childcare and Preschools of the Reggio Municipality is responsible for the functioning and operation of the ECEC system, while the pedagogical coordination group oversees the implementation of the pedagogical approach. The system is mostly financed by the local (municipal) government (80%). Parents cover around 20% of the financing, but there is financial support for families in need or on social support (as well as criteria for enrolment that favour the most disadvantaged children). Around 40% of the municipal budget is dedicated to education (even more in some small villages). There are 33 childcare centres managed by the municipal institution, and there is an enrolment rate of 51% (the highest in Italy, where the average is well below 30%).

At the level of preschools and childcare centres, a collective work group (or councils), which includes staff and parents, supports the participation of families and the local community in the children's learning processes and in the organisation of the educational programmes. Reggio Emilia also has 'childhood councils' involving parents and citizens in the main decisions pertaining to ECEC. The childhood councils are a participatory project, with members elected through a democratic process. In 2020, 800 parents and citizens applied to become members of the councils, demonstrating the civic engagement of the city's population towards ECEC and children.

In addition, there are two other institutions – Reggio Children, an international research and training centre, and the Reggio Children Foundation, which is involved in non-profit making cooperation projects. These institutions have been instrumental in the global diffusion of the Reggio Children Approach, which has today been adopted across Europe (particularly in the Nordic countries) as well as in several childcare centres and preschools in the USA and Latin America, in the Middle East, South Africa, India, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Reggio Children is in relationship with more than 140 countries across the world.

The city of Reggio Emilia has thus been a pioneer in ECEC – an experience which has been conceived and led by progressive minds, in an effort to ensure equality through inclusive pedagogical practices that aim to uncover the learning and development potential of every child. The underlying philosophy is of the child as a capable and active citizen, and an agent of change for a more just and sustainable society. As Reggio Emilia is now globally recognised as a centre of excellence in inclusive ECEC, the

progressive forces (recently reconfirmed to lead the City Council) are continuously evolving and rethinking children's services to address current and future challenges. In the coming years, all childcare centres will be made free (without fees) for everyone, to affirm the universality of ECEC and, more importantly, to ensure equal access to all children. Pedagogical programmes will also deal with emerging issues such as sustainability.

LUCA VECCHI,
Mayor of Reggio Emilia:

We live in a difficult time where egoism, insecurity and fears are threatening to break social and community ties – an era in which there are leaders who raise walls and work to break down the bridges of trust and hope among people. Today, like never before, anywhere in the world, investing in ECEC and in children's rights and education represents a message of great power, the ethical basis of a new global humanism and renewed sense of solidarity. For us, childcare and preschools have never only been places where to look after children, but places where children are protagonists as the bearers of rights and skills – places where education is considered an active process that involves everyone, from teachers to children, from atelieristi and pedagogues to parents and communities. ECEC becomes a place of equality and democracy where children are also, and above all, citizens.

4.4. INVESTING IN ECEC IN THE 'FORGOTTEN' RURAL COMMUNITIES: THE VILLAGE OF ANTHISNES (BELGIUM)

Anthisnes is a small rural village of around 4,000 inhabitants, located in the Region of Wallonia (Belgium) near the city of Liège. The main activity in the municipality is agriculture, with two thirds of the land being used for cultivation. The unemployment rate is almost 9% and a large part of the population works outside the municipality, creating demands for services that enable the work-life balance to be guaranteed.

In recent decades, small and rural municipalities such as Anthisnes have faced a reduction in their capacity to provide a wide range of social services and economic

opportunities. This is very often due to budget cuts, and the result is an increasing sense among the inhabitants of 'being forgotten'. Along with growing phenomena like depopulation, these dynamics have fuelled the resentment of rural populations towards mainstream politics, and consensus has grown for far-right political movements.

For this reason the Council of Anthisnes, which since 1994 has been led by the Social Party, decided in 2019 to invest a substantial proportion of the village's budget to set up a public childcare centre – the first in the village's history. The *Enfant'In* childcare centre looks after 18 children from 3 months to 3 years of age, from 7.00am to 6.00pm. It applies fees on a progressive scale, based on the income of parents. The centre is connected with other welfare services in the community – in particular medical staff, to ensure the monitoring of children's physical well-being and early screening, but also to supporting breastfeeding and maternal health. It is also connected with welfare services promoting cultural, leisure and sports activities, as well as summer camps at accessible prices. In addition, it is connected with welfare measures that focus on assisting the most disadvantaged through income support and access to housing.



By providing opportunities for children and their parents (to work and increase a household's income), the choice of Anthisnes represents a means by which the local progressives strive to reinforce solidarity and collective resilience, and thus to safeguard the very existence (and essence) of their community.

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In rural areas, collective resilience has to address sustainability and environmental protection while seeking to enhance children's development and self-agency (the pedagogical project of *Enfant'In* also promotes culture and knowledge about sustainability). This is done through awareness-raising of ecological behaviour (such as recycling, the use of materials from the surrounding environment and nature, and a nutrition programme with food and nutrients produced by organic agriculture and local farmers and cooperatives).

Since the opening of the childcare centre in January 2019, it has now reached its maximum attendance of 18 children, testifying to the success of (and the need for) this initiative. The population has also shown its appreciation by reconfirming (and actually, increasing the votes of) the progressive majority in the Council, also strengthening the future plans to invest in ECEC. The example of Anthisnes, although small-scale, illustrates the importance for progressives to think about ECEC as an essential instrument not only for ensuring work-life balance and a good start for children, but also, and more importantly, for preserving social cohesion and building sustainable futures for local rural communities.

MARC TARABELLA,

Mayor of Anthisnes and
Member of the European Parliament:

We have an active population which very often is forced to work outside the municipality. Since 1996, we have invested in guaranteeing a free nursery – out of school hours – for children in pre-school education. But we want more, and better, for our children and their parents, and this is why we chose to invest in establishing the first public childcare centre in the history of our small village. Services are the way we keep our village alive. As a newly arrived citizen told me, which the best reward I can get as mayor, “We didn't know that there were so many services by coming to live in a small village!”

TONI PELOSATO,

member of the Village Council,
Alderman for Education and Culture:

It is at the local level, among our small communities, that we build the sustainable development of the planet!

4.5. FIGHTING FOR CHILDREN'S AND WOMEN EQUALITY IN FIDESZ' HUNGARY

Hungary has been lagging behind in terms of the reach of its ECEC system. As of 2018, only 17% of children aged 0 to 3 participating into childcare programmes, the sixth-lowest number in the EU. Furthermore, almost one in every four Hungarian children were at risk of poverty and social exclusion (23%). These numbers paint an alarming picture about the status of children's inequalities in Hungary.

The current far right ruling party, Fidesz, has been in power and dominating the political landscape since 2010. During the past decade, its regime, which has become increasingly authoritarian, has operated to undermine collective resilience and solidarity, by gradually mutating the core elements of the welfare system, also with regards to ECEC, built by progressive forces which governed Hungary until 2010s. All these changes have been designed to favor middle classes, representing the core electorate of Fidesz, and to penalize children living in most disadvantaged households. Particularly discriminated are the Roma who often attend segregated, and of lower quality, institutions.

ECEC services in Hungary are nursery schools for children from 0 to 3 years old, and kindergartens for children from 3 to 6 years old. The preschool education has been made compulsory, and therefore every child has access to it (more than 90%). Parents have to pay for meals, but 70% of the children are entitled to price reduction or a free meal. Although attendance to preschool education, at national level, is high, it drastically decreases in disadvantaged regions and those densely inhabited by Roma population. The availability of nursery schools instead is very limited across the country. The Fidesz Government, has expanded available places in childcare, using in particular EU funds. However, the quality and inclusiveness of services has substantially decreased mainly due to the increase in the pupil educators' ratio, and the lack of professional staff. Salaries in ECEC services are extremely low, and therefore many positions remain vacant or taken by unqualified staff.

In addition, Government has also tightened criteria for access to nursery schools, disfavoring, in particular, parents not employed. Parents must present an employment certificate or child protection certificate in order to access the services. The aim, in principle, is to create opportunities for women job seekers; on the contrary, chances for employment are reduced if children are not previously taken care by a service.

The limited development of ECEC in Hungary have been largely influenced by the common belief that the needs of young children, especially in the first three years of life, are best met by mothers taking care of them. Women are seen in negative terms if they choose to go back to work after giving birth, reducing support for investments in childcare services.

On the contrary the same belief has strengthened parental leaves policies. A 3-years paid maternity/parental allowance was introduced since 1967 to contrast low fertility rates and promote children's home care (especially for those women less educated). This policy has basically lasted until today. Women have 24 weeks maternity leave but are allowed to take up to three years of leave and receive maternity benefits. However, these benefits, as well as most of social assistance, have been severely reduced under the Fidez' Government. We can easily capture the degree to which the welfare state has been curbed by looking at the change in family-or child-related social benefits measured as the share of GDP. The spending amounted to 2.86% of GDP in 2010, and it fell as low as 2.06% by 2018. The Hungarian state now invests only two-thirds of what it used to spend a decade ago on child and family benefits.

In addition, the focus of social assistance has been moved from protecting and capacitating the poorest members of society to benefiting the middle class through tax allowances rather than direct income support. Tax deductions were paired with the introduction of the flat rate on the personal income tax in 2012. The net negative effect of a regressive approach towards welfare and taxation have particularly undermined living conditions of children coming from labour-class families and families at risk of poverty.

As the political landscape in Hungary is still dominated by Fidesz, the last round of municipal elections in 2019 has seen increasing signs of resistance vis-à-vis its regime, with progressive regaining grounds in key districts across the country, including the ones in the capital, Budapest. Progressive local governments and municipalities, although they have little room for maneuver to contrast Fidesz' policies, due to the centralisation of welfare and education policies operated by the government, are nevertheless fighting for promoting equality and values of social justice and solidarity. As a concrete example, the first district of Budapest introduced an unconditional basic income for its residents during the coronavirus pandemic particularly favoring poorest households.

Many others refuse to implement regressive and discriminatory practices in access to welfare and education to women and children. This is the case in the VIII district of Budapest, where a complex development plan of kindergartens is implemented by municipal staff supported by the local Rosa Parks Foundation and international counterparts, with the aim of desegregating those institutions that presently have mostly Roma children. The major element of the plan is the introduction of inclusive pedagogical programs and community development. Similarly, in Csobánka, a village 15 km from Budapest with 3000 inhabitants, civil society organizations, notably the Csodamuhely Association and Partners Hungary, ECEC professionals, volunteers and parents, financially supported by the municipality budget and additional funds from the EU, are engaged to offer inclusive, quality services for young children. The local kindergarten applies child-centered pedagogical to reach out all children, also those in disadvantage, while a Toy Library is available for afterschool programmes. And inter-sectoral collaboration is established between the local health, social, child protection and educational service providers to tackle the root causes of children's disadvantage.

The battle for equality in Hungary will be long, but a new generation of progressive leaders in local governments, NGOs and civil society organizations, is taking up the fight. They understand that children will be at the heart of change, and guaranteeing their rights and promote their emancipation will be the first and foremost action to restore justice and fairness.

MARIA HERCZOG,
Executive Director,
Family Child Youth Association :

First years last forever, according to our best knowledge, therefore investing early in a child rights based, holistic and comprehensive way, including support to the families and children, high quality universal and targeted services is the best possible opportunity to ensure the wellbeing of children.

V. THE MAKING OF A CHILD UNION: RECOMMENDATIONS

The tragedy of the covid-19 pandemic, and the economic recession due to the lockdown, has highlighted the fragility of our collective resilience. Resilience is undermined by existing inequalities, and these take shape right from the early years of life. By tackling inequalities among young children (and their parents), inclusive ECEC services – in connection with protection and labour policies – represent a key policy for strengthening collective responses to current and future crises.

However, children from more disadvantaged households and areas very often have lower access to quality inclusive ECEC. As these services were halted or reduced during the covid-19 lockdown there is a risk it could lead to increased inequalities both in the short and long term. The recommendations below aim to break the cycle of disadvantage in the upcoming recovery phase.

FOR PROGRESSIVE FORCES IN MEMBER STATES, AT NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL:

There is a further challenge if the shrinking of national budgets due to the covid-19 crisis provokes an overall move away from the funding of ECEC, and if governments encourage more commodification and marketisation of these services, or an increase in parents' financial contribution. Excluding children from ECEC – be they children from families with fewer economic resources or from middle-class families falling into precarity due to the recession – will reduce opportunities for parents to return to work and to restore disposable income. In short, excluding children from ECEC will increase inequalities for both generations, and reinforce the sense of 'being forgotten' for large parts of the population.

Progressive must work in order to promote the agenda of a Child Union and its three principles:

1) Ensure the access of disadvantaged children to quality ECEC through:

- Child rights and legal entitlement rather than demand-driven ECEC
- The expansion of public services rather than private provision, and the prevention of the commodification and marketisation of ECEC
- Direct subsidies to services rather than subsidies to parents (fighting the rhetoric of 'free choice')
- Proportionate universalism, where universal services (with means-tested fees) are accompanied by additional resources for disadvantaged children (with a lower socio-economic status and who are territorially marginalised), to build consensus also among middle-class and top earners.
- Flexibility in the organisation of services to facilitate the access of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (and also those with parents temporarily or long-term unemployed or with irregular employment status).

2) Make ECEC interact positively with social protection and labour policies to tackle structural inequalities as risk factors for children's development, through:

- The expansion of social protection policies to ensure safety nets for people at risk of poverty and social exclusion; also the reinforcement of social housing to reduce the living costs of low-income families
- A universal basic income for children, or income support schemes benefitting children
- Active labour market policies (ALMPs) to stimulate employment, particularly female employment
- A statutory minimum wage set at a living wage threshold in every member state, in order to reduce in-work poverty
- The eradication of gender pay gaps
- A decent work-life balance and adequate parental leave (for both mothers and fathers) in terms of time, flexibility and economic resources.

3) Guarantee equal access to quality and inclusive ECEC services with:

- Inclusive learning outcomes and curricula which focus on skills and abilities enabling children to grow up and live in the 21st century, but also strengthening their role as agents of change for more just, sustainable and resilient societies and economies by promoting competences such as respect for diversity, cooperation and solidarity. ECEC services should have structural quality together with process quality aiming at the co-construction of knowledge with the child, and promoting the child's emancipation and role as agent of democratic and progressive change.
- Inclusive pedagogical practices rather than sequential learning, thus enabling the needs of every child to be met (notably those of children living in disadvantaged households or territories) and enabling ECEC to connect with the child's 'outside world' (families, communities, welfare).
- Inclusive learning environments (which are seen as the 'third educator', after the teachers and parents) to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge and learning through experiences.
- Training for staff, and recognition of their role as co-agents of change (with the child), through a charter ensuring their rights, adequate salaries and working conditions, strengthened by the role of trade unions.
- Recognition of the role of parents and communities as educators and as agents of change, and therefore as a fundamental pillar of ECEC, by stimulating their democratic involvement in decision-making about the educational project, and by stimulating their active participation in learning activities.

V. THE MAKING OF A CHILD UNION: RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR PROGRESSIVE FORCES IN THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS:

1) Make it happen through the Child Guarantee

After years of anticipation, the European Child Guarantee has become a policy priority. This is welcome and must stay high on the EU's recovery agenda to ensure that European, national, and sub-national efforts and resources are mobilised to eliminate child poverty in the EU.

- Implement the Child Guarantee swiftly, as the EU's response to child poverty and inequalities. Ensure that the Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee follows the investing in children paradigm,⁷⁰ which urges member states to set up integrated strategies to address child poverty and social exclusion, and to promote children's well-being for ages 0-18. As this means linking together access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services (including ECEC), and children's participation, progressives in the European institutions should ensure that the Child Guarantee proposal promotes the principles of a Child Union effectively.
- Ensure that funding is earmarked from the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) to implement the Child Guarantee under the upcoming EU Multiannual Financial Framework

2) Embed it in EU decision-making and funding

- Ensure that the policy mix put forward in the publication on a Child Union is taken into account in an equal degree when designing EU policies and guidance on early childhood education and care, and when designing policies on the social inclusion of children, parental leave and the work-life balance. Strengthen inter-service and inter-institutional cooperation on education, employment and social policies in order to make room for more child-centred solutions.
- Recognise the principles of a Child Union as an integral part of the post-covid-19 recovery packages that the Commission is planning, and therefore allow member states to implement the principles of a Child Union to respond to the economic recession and social crisis.
- In their reallocation to address the crisis, make full use of existing European funding instruments, such as the European Structural and Investment Funds and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), to promote a Child Union. Take the three principles into account in the allocation of funding, particularly the ESF+, under the next MFF.

⁷⁰ European Commission (2013), Commission Recommendation Investing in Children. Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage (2013/112/EU).

3) Improve ways to hold member states accountable for delivering on these principles

- Embed the principles of a Child Union into the European Semester, firstly by including relevant indicators in the EU Social Scoreboard that are related to child poverty reduction, work-life balance and the expansion of quality and inclusive ECEC; and secondly, by evaluating progress for the most disadvantaged children (in terms of socio-economic status as well as geographical location, gender, migrant status, special needs or Roma population), and by conducting analyses of the drivers of inequalities, in order to provide guidance to member states on correcting social imbalances.
- Make the embedding of Child Union principles in the European Semester part of a larger strategy to integrate the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 into the EU's economic and social monitoring process. A new Europe 2030 strategy could indeed reinforce and move forward, in progressive terms, the interlinkages between social, economic and sustainable environmental policies.
- Ensure that Child Union principles are priorities in the annual work programme of the EU Social Protection Committee (SPC) and Employment Committee (EMCO), as well as in parallel committees in the European Parliament and the Committee of Regions, and establish working groups to regularly monitor the progress of EU strategies and instruments in the member states.
- The European Commission should work with the SPC and EMCO to find better ways to bring comparable data to the forefront on the three principles of a Child Union.

EUROPE NEEDS MORE DATA ABOUT CHILDREN

Data are essential tools to understand economic and social phenomena, plan policies and evaluate results. However, data about children are very often scattered, and limited, both at national and comparative EU level. It is therefore essential that both the member states and the EU reinforce the capacities of national statistical offices and Eurostat to collect timely data on ECEC (access, but also quality, outcomes in terms of cognitive-socio-emotional and physical development) along with data on the impact of welfare policies on children. It also fundamental to produce data that might be disaggregated in terms of a number of risk factors, above all the socio-economic status of parents, gender, migrant status and geographical location, in order to assess the distributional impact (ex ante and ex post) of policies, and thus be able to plan and/or reorient interventions to tackle inequalities. In addition, statistical tools must be adopted that enable ex ante assessment of whether proposed policies or measures would benefit the most disadvantaged. These must be adopted both by national and local agencies, as well as the European institutions.

A Child Union must be considered an essential part of the recovery and stimulus packages of member states and of the European Union in order to tackle the learning loss of children (especially those from lower and middle-class families), (re)activate parents in the labour market, and contribute to stopping the surge of economic poverty and social exclusion.

By doing this, the EU and its member states will better respond to the call for a change to the economic and social model of Europe, towards more solidarity. They will also better respond to the call for the revamping of Europe's welfare instruments, and will then advance a New European Deal which makes the economy work for all, and which equips citizens and protects them from downturns.

THE CHILD UNION IS THE PROGRESSIVE RESPONSE TO OVERCOME INEQUALITIES AMONG CHILDREN AND THROUGHOUT GENERATIONS.

It is an essential element of a New European Deal founded upon a revamped sense of solidarity and a welfare state enabling to tackle inequalities while also promoting collective resilience and sustainability.

This research project aims at delineating the mainlines of a Child Union intended as a European programme to fight children's inequalities through access to opportunities for children, above all, ECEC and social safety nets.

Progressives must fight for systemic transformations. **Children are at the heart of this change because inequalities are already moulding in the early years of life**, and therefore, policies, in particular early childhood education and care, which tackle unfairness among children (and their parents) lay the foundations for social justice and collective resilience.

Evidence shows that participation in quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) programmes leads to positive gains for disadvantaged children, in the acquisition of capabilities and skills, the benefits of which might be seen through their later educational and life achievements.

Many progressive leaders across Europe are at the forefront of the fight against children's inequalities, and they strongly defend investment to promote ECEC. The champions of a Child Union can be found in national governments, as can be seen in Slovenia, in a small rural town in Belgium, or in cities across Italy, Hungary and Spain.

Progressives must guarantee that ECEC services are high quality, meaning that they are inclusive and are thus able to meet the specific needs of each child while empowering that child to become an agent of changes for more sustainable and just economies and societies. ECEC policies must be complemented by, and positively interact with, labour and welfare policies that tackle the root causes of inequalities among children.

The Child Guarantee, as the EU's primary response to child poverty and inequalities, is on its way but progressives need to make sure that it is useful to promote the Child Union and its principles of improving access to ECEC and better integrating it with other welfare provision. Equally, as Europe is facing an unprecedented health and economic crisis, the Child Union must be considered as an integral part of the post-COVID19 recovery.

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